Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I am conducting an oral history interview for the Vietnam Archive’s Oral History Project with Dr. Robert L. Ordoñez. Today is March 22, 2006. It is approximately 2:30 PM Central Standard Time and we are on the telephone. Both of us are in Lubbock, Texas. I am on the campus of Texas Tech University in the Vietnam Archive’s interview room. Dr. Ordoñez, I’d like to start with first of all what we discussed before we began recording which is the process of the interview. And I’d like to ask you for a verbal yea or nay whether or not you agree to do the interview, that you’re aware that it will be made public, that by doing the interview you are agreeing to donate this interview to the Vietnam Archive and that you understand the legal disclosure and the interview agreement that you did sign.

Robert Ordoñez: Yes, I do. I did sign it.

RV: Okay, very good. Well, sir, let’s start with some biographical information. Could you tell me where you were born, when you were born, and then tell me a little bit about your childhood?

RO: Okay. I was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1949 and raised in a very traditional family. I had parents and a brother and a sister. My dad was a World War II veteran and a carpenter by trade. Went to Catholic school for first—no, I’m sorry. I went to public school and then went to Catholic school for a few years and then went back to public school. I graduated from high school in 1967. I was involved growing up
in sports and Boy Scouts and lots of summer jobs, and was just very active in my little
community. We were very family oriented and very traditional.

RV: Tell me a little bit about your parents, about your mom and dad.
RO: They’re both from Las Vegas, New Mexico. We still have family there. And at the time we used to travel a lot to Las Vegas, New Mexico, which is about two hours away from Albuquerque. My dad, being a World War II veteran, was in the National Guard when the war broke out and went straight to Sicily and spent three years there in the war.

RV: He was in the Army?
RO: The Army, right. And he was very much involved in veterans’ organizations later on: American Legion, DAV (Disabled American Veterans), Veterans of Foreign War, the VFW. My mother was a housewife. She raised us all in a very, very good, very close family. They both had two years of college and that was it.

RV: Okay. And you said you had one brother and one sister?
RO: Yes.

RV: Are they older or younger?
RO: I have one older sister and one younger brother.

RV: Okay, so you’re stuck in the middle.
RO: Right in the middle.

RV: Do you want to tell me briefly about them?
RO: My sister is a year older and my brother is a year younger. So we were brought up very close together. We all went, of course, to the same schools. My sister did not graduate from college. She went into college, got married, and started raising a family. But she’s been very successful at what she does. She works for the university and she also does taxes on the side and has had little businesses for her and her husband. My brother graduated with an architectural degree and became a city manager for a long time until he retired. And now he’s back into managing, plans management. He’s retired from one and getting ready to retire from another job. My sister has three sons. Her and her husband have three sons. My brother has one son, and I have three sons.
RV: Okay, very good. You talked a little bit about you went to public school and then you went into Catholic school. How were you academically? And tell me about your hobbies growing up.

RO: Well, academically I’ve always done very, very well. I graduated in, I guess, the top five percent of my class in high school. In hobbies I was mainly involved in Boy Scouts since I was eleven years old. Lots of camping. I loved working with animals and did a lot of ranch work and horseback riding and working on cattle ranches and a little bit of rodeo. My dad was a carpenter by trade and we helped him on the weekends. We learned that trade and also, on our own, my brother and I learned automotive and we used to work on cars a lot growing up in high school.

RV: Was this more of a hobby or something that you were thinking, “Well, I can do this as a career?”

RO: No, none of it was ever career. Growing up I never knew that there was such a thing as a hobby. We just did things because we liked to do them and everybody else did them and we all did them together.

RV: So your dad was a carpenter and you learned that skill as well?

RO: Oh, yes.

RV: So early on did you enjoy working with your hands and taking apart and fixing things?

RO: Oh, yes.

RV: And tell me about your sports involvement. You mentioned that.

RO: Yeah, lots of track and cross-country in high school and intramural basketball in college. Plus also we enjoyed a lot of outdoor things like hunting—well, mainly hunting—bow hunting and rifle hunting growing up.

RV: What was Albuquerque like in the 1950s growing up?

RO: Albuquerque in the 1950s was a city of about a 100,000. Maybe a 150,000 at the most. It was a very community-centered type of city. We were very social and had a lot of friends and a lot of time at friends’ growing up. The community that we lived in—we lived in what’s called a little barrio. That’s just a little Hispanic community. I don’t know. I thought it was very warm. People shared things together and neighbors and everybody was very close. And you couldn’t ever do anything wrong because your
neighbors would always tell the parents. (laughs) There was lots and lots of respect and lots of honor. It was not a rough city. It was a very, very decent city, it became rough later on. In high school it was the same thing. We had moved from one sector of the city to another sector in grade school, I guess, about the sixth grade. From the South Valley to the North Valley and again it was predominately Hispanic where we lived in. That’s the way all of New Mexico is anyway. Nothing really special. It was just very enjoyable. I had a very enjoyable childhood just with relatives and friends and cousins. We were always doing things and just always very active. And if we weren’t enjoying ourselves we were working and I enjoyed working and helping my dad remodel. It was always just so much fun. I don’t think we ever had a dull moment growing up.

RV: It sounds like you had a really good childhood and were very close to your mother and father and your siblings.

RO: Yes.

RV: Do you all remain close today?

RO: Yes, very much so.

RV: Okay, very good. Tell me about your high school years and your social networking, sports, and academics. Of course, I want to know about emphasis on education within your family and what led you to your going to college and your advanced degrees.

RO: In high school in the ninth grade I went to an all boys’ school and it was a prep school and it was primarily a vocational type school. I just went there for one year. I took electronics in the ninth grade and learned how to build radios and it was very, very advanced. I did very well academically. My dad and my mother had such high standards for us we had to study and be very, very disciplined. We could not bring home poor grades, and so it was a pattern and just natural for us to study hard and to do very well in school. And so I’ve always done very well in school.

RV: What were your favorite subjects?

RO: Well, I loved them all. I did not have a particular favorite subject. I loved math, I loved science, and I loved history. Even English was not that bad. It was very good. I loved sports. Physical ed, we excelled in that.

RV: What kind of sports were you into?
RO: In the ninth grade, that’s when I started in track and cross-country. I just had a lot of speed.

RV: Were you naturally smart or was it a combination of your brain and your mother’s requirements?

RO: The thing is that people think that intelligence is inherited. Some of it is but most of it is acquired and it has to do with discipline within a family. When people do not have high intelligence it’s usually because of a birth defect. Again, that’s the physician in me coming out. It’s either cerebral palsy or just little injuries when you’re born. And sometimes dyslexia can often be mistaken for lack of intelligence. I have two sons that are dyslexic and one of them had a full scholarship to A&M and he’s an engineer. The youngest in his team and he got a job two weeks out of college and he keeps getting promoted. He’s highly intelligent and reads and he’s very dyslexic so that’s really a myth. As far as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), all boys have ADHD. (laughs) I mean, I got into trouble all the time and accused of being there but you just channel it. And if you have good parents who can channel that energy it can be directed to the right way. We lived in a very modest home and we’re not people of means, but yet we had tremendous pride in what we did and who we were. And it was just expected of us to do well. So as far as intelligence, intelligence came, I believe, as far as acquisition. Because I don’t believe that I’m really (more) overly intelligent than anybody else. But I do believe that it’s just a lot of hard work and a lot of addition where you add up and you come up with a lot of knowledge afterwards, after you’ve added it up.

RV: It sounds like you saw that through your father and his hard work, what your mother expected of you all and the structure that you had.

RO: Yeah, and they were both readers. They bought us books. They read to us when we were children. We had encyclopedias that they paid on payments and the encyclopedias were like heaven. Us kids, we loved getting into them on rainy days and sunshine days we were outside with all the kids getting dirty.

RV: Okay. And in high school did you have kind of an idea of where you might go? Were you thinking college?
RO: Oh, yeah. There was no doubts that we were going to go to college. There was absolutely no doubts.

RV: And your sister went first, is that correct?

RO: Yes.

RV: Okay, and so it was expected for you and your brother.

RO: Right. We were just going to go. That’s all there was to it. And my initial—during high school I did very well. I liked all my subjects, I got very high grades. And just socially we had a little group. We stuck together during college, too. It was just a typical nice high school type of environment and nothing adverse. No trouble or anything. We were not troubled. There were kids who were troubled, and you want to know why? It was because of a poor home environment. And with us, just like anybody else, we did the sneaking around and the things that got us into trouble. But we got severely reprimanded, so therefore it was not a pattern in our life. It was just experimental and that’s all.

RV: Your father was in World War II and he went into a really difficult theater in Italy. Did you guys ever discuss this?

RO: Always.

RV: Oh, yeah?

RO: He was very open about it. He was very open. He was very fluent in French, German, Italian, and of course Spanish. He was a linguistic person. He told us a lot about his stories in the war. In fact, we would go see John Wayne and Audie Murphy movies together. He was very open about it. He was in demolition. He was a sergeant. He got wounded, too, when he was in World War II.

RV: Did he fight for the duration of the war?

RO: The whole duration, three years.

RV: And what do you remember most about what he told you? Is there a particular incident or a memory that comes to mind?

RO: Well, the Battle of the Bulge was the worst. He went into detail on that. And he talked about the German prisoners. And the things that he received a lion’s claw from one of them and kind of learned German. He had to guard this one German prisoner and they became somewhat of friends. And then when the Germans started pushing in...
the Battle of the Bulge, in the evening they had to leave everything behind and just take
their rifles and canteen and that was it and they had to flee.

RV: Wow.

RO: Yeah, that’s the way it was in the Battle of the Bulge.

RV: Yeah, very intense.

RO: And the thing that always impressed me was when the shells would come in
and people were dying, and I just couldn’t imagine what he was going through.

RV: When you were in a war yourself did all that stuff come to you?

RO: Oh, yes, very much so.

RV: I take it he was probably supportive of the fact that you were in the military,
especially when you were involved in a war.

RO: Right. My dad wrote to me. I learned this later on—my dad has since
passed away and he died of cancer in 1987—but while I was in Vietnam he would write
letters to me that would take him all week to write. He’d have a trashcan full of
crumpled up papers in which he would continually correct himself until he had the
perfect letter. And I received one to two letters a week the whole time I was there.

RV: Wow.

RO: He would tell me about the mortars coming in and about how to guard
myself. And I would always lie and say, “Oh, no. We’re okay. We’re not seeing any of
that. We’re not seeing any action.” But he read right through it.

RV: He knew it. That’s incredible that he would give you advice on how to
actually survive in a war.

RO: Yeah, he did. He really did.

RV: Well, moving into the college years, tell me what you did after high school
and getting into that.

RO: After high school I attended the University of New Mexico. I was an
architecture major. I loved art. I was a school artist in high school. I even drew
professionally for a couple of little magazines as a high school student. I didn’t really
take formal art except for one class my last year. They actually made me take art because
I was already making money out of everybody. I was self-taught in art. So I took
architecture because I could put in a little bit of the building, which I liked, and some of
the art that I liked. I was very discouraged with architecture. I just did not like it. I did
not like the liberalism of most of the artists that were in the fine arts department.
Everybody was pretty much very left-wing. So college was—I went in college liking it at
first in my first semester. By the time I was done with my first year I was very
discouraged about college. The war was going on. This was already 1968 and the Tet
Offensive had already been going on, and I was between my freshman and sophomore
year. I went back to work at a ranch. I worked for the Department of the Interior and we
developed a wildlife refuge up by Las Vegas, by my home. And I decided that’s what I
would change to. I would change to wildlife management. Because I always loved the
outdoors and loved animals and at that time was when I was going to change. But my
aunt—we were a very close family, so any time I was not at home whoever I was near
took over as a parent. So my aunt took over as a parent even though I was already
nineteen at the time. She told me, “You stay in school.” Because I was seriously
thinking about going into the military. I was just so tired of it, the way things were at
Kent State. Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated that year and it
was very, very discouraging to me. I just wanted to do what my dad did and just go into
the military.

RV: What years were your college years?
RO: I started in ’67. I graduated from high school in ’67 so I went that following
fall, and then I did three semesters. I did the first year in ’67 and ’68 and then I did the
fall of ’68. At the end of the fall of ’68, towards the winter, my grades really dropped. I
was just very discouraged at the time. And it wasn’t because I was partying or anything,
it’s just that I didn’t like any of the subjects I was taking. I really hated architecture by
that time and I was really not liking college life. I was not liking the people over there. I
liked a lot of the people who were there who I was friends with. But the professors and
the vast majority there were into the anti-war protesting which really was extremely
discouraging. And at that time I decided I really wanted to go into the military. My dad
highly discouraged me. He said, “You don’t want to go into the war.”

RV: This is during the war and you still wanted to go in?
RO: Yes, I did.

RV: Why was that?
RO: Sense of duty and also adventure. My grades got so bad that I was drafted. I (Laughs) And I actually, I guess, I did it on purpose. Back then, that was before the lottery, so you had to have a college deferment. And the lottery didn’t come into effect until 1969. So, I guess, I subconsciously just kind of let things slide and my dad still talked me into going into the Navy. He said, “I don’t want you to go into the Army because you don’t understand what war is about.” And I really didn’t think he knew what he was talking about. I thought I knew better. But anyway, I went ahead and listened to him. And I, along with several others of my friends at the time, we all quit college together. One of them went into the Marine Corps. The rest of us went into the Navy.

RV: Wow. What did your mother think?

RO: My mother? No matter what decision I ever made, she always backed it up. She said, “Just take care of yourself and do the right thing.” And she was always very, very encouraging. She didn’t get very emotional about it. She was glad I was in the Navy and not in the Marines or the Army.

RV: Right. Let’s back up a little bit into your high school years. We discussed what it was like in the 1950s in Albuquerque. But going forward into the ’60s and America’s involvement in Southeast Asia, what were your thoughts about that? I mean, you’re going through some formative years there in high school. What were your thoughts? What did you know about?

RO: We knew very little. By the time I graduated from high school in ’67, the war was just picking up. And ’65 was when Johnson really sent a large portion of troops out there. Very few of us knew people who were in the war until we got into high school. Then all of the sudden high school students who were just one or two years ahead of us were writing back home saying they were in the war. We never really knew any of them. You just heard stories and it was like somewhat—it tickled our curiosity as young men, especially as an adventurous type of person. The news would come out with dealings about Vietnam and it wasn’t until Tet that they really started coming out. They’d have the number of people dying that week in Vietnam and they’d have all these things going on. I really thought, “My dad’s right. I don’t want to go over there.” But as time went on, and the protests starting going on, and we started learning a little bit more about
Vietnam, I really became very empathetic with the cause of stopping communism. And people were not understanding really about what communism was. They said, “It’s just a form of government and they need it.” But actually it’s a form of totalitarianism that just took rights away from people. And in our country my dad fought for the country for the freedom that we had. We were in the Cold War and we had the best government in the world, which I thought then and which I still think now. And we enjoyed a tremendous amount of freedom and just hearing what these iron or bamboo curtain countries underwent. I felt that people were asking us for help and why not? It’s the price to pay.

RV: Tell what you thought about—let’s start with President Eisenhower. What do you remember about him?


RV: Golf. (Laughs)

RO: That’s it. That’s all I remember. He was a general and he was like a has-been. I really wasn’t impressed. Kennedy, I was very, very impressed as we all were. I was in the ninth grade when he was assassinated.

RV: What do you remember about that day?

RO: Oh, man. My dad came home and we came home and we all took off and we watched together. My parents are Democrats. But that didn’t matter because Kennedy just had such an allure and such a charisma to him that the whole country loved him. The whole country loved Jackie, unless you were a college professor and then you really didn’t get involved with politics that deep. You just knew what was on the surface and what was on the surface was what the country needed. And he was just a very outstanding young man. He was in his forties and the youngest president we’ve ever had and all that. And then when he got killed it was just very devastating for us.

RV: Do you think that shifted the country in any way? Like, a lot of people say—

RO: Yes, it did. Oh, it did a lot.

RV: Like a loss of innocence?

RO: Oh, very much so. Very much so.

RV: Did it affect you in any way like that? Did you say, “Oh my gosh, I see the world different now?”
RO: No. Well, it was like I couldn’t believe it was happening. That stuff is not supposed to happen. But when you’re in high school very little affects you. If it doesn’t affect the school and it doesn’t affect your friends it doesn’t affect you. (Laughs) I mean that’s the way teenagers are and it’s hard for them to become global. You don’t become global until you get a little bit more mature.

RV: So after November of ’63 Johnson takes over. What do you remember about him in his early years there before he’s your commander-in-chief?

RO: Well, Johnson did not have the charisma of Kennedy. And you know (laughs) everybody criticized him because he put himself into shoes that he couldn’t fit. So he was under the gun by everybody, including my parents. My mom didn’t like him. (Laughs)

RV: Oh, yeah?

RO: Yeah, because he took the place of our president. (Laughs)

RV: Right.

RO: That’s what I remember. That’s not what she would admit to now.

RV: Going back to what you were saying about why the United States went to Southeast Asia, you talked about stopping communism and the aspect of the Cold War. Did you see, at that point, the Vietnam War as part of the Cold War or did this kind of come later?

RO: I saw it at that point as part of the Cold War. Because Kennedy’s plan to get us in and out of Vietnam, he had a plan. And so he escalated the war to expanding from an advisory to actually combatants. And his plan was to go in and mop up and get out, and we all expected that would happen. But when Johnson took it over he couldn’t stop the flow. It seemed like it was like a dike that had a little hole in it and he didn’t know how to stop it and it just got bigger and bigger.

RV: You mentioned the anti-war protests while you were there in Albuquerque, seeing it on TV, but also witnessing it there on the campus. Can you comment on that, the effect that it had upon you and also what you saw?

RO: Well, there was a lot of organized protests done on campus. They would have people with loudspeakers talking against the war and a lot of the songs were beginning to become very anti-war. What we saw on the TV just sort of correlated with
what was going on on the campus. And listening to them, a lot of them were very
convincing. But these were young eighteen and nineteen year old kids who had never
been anywhere but home, high school, and college, yet they’re talking about where we
should be as a country. And I looked at them and said, “They don’t really have a leg to
stand on.” I listened. And I listened to them with an open mind to see if they had
anything to say. And I didn’t hear anybody that had anything good to say, as far as
convincing me to feel otherwise from what I felt.

RV: Did your parents react in any certain way, especially your father, as a
veteran?

RO: He just kind of cursed them. (Laughs) “Oh, those hippies.” And all that
stuff. But no, he said that there’s no such thing as a good war. That’s what my dad
would say. “There’s not such thing as a good war. I wish we would get out of there.
However, if we’ve got to be there, we’ve got to be there. Hurry up and get it done with
but don’t just throw the baby out with the water.”

RV: Right. Well, going into the military and into the United States Navy, what
were your expectations about doing that? What did you think would happen?

RO: Well, I thought that I would see the world. I thought that I would be
involved in fancy schools and electronic schools. And getting an education in areas that I
had never thought of, nuclear submarines and all of that. I thought I was going to be
doing all of that. And I didn’t because I’m colorblind. And even though I scored, I
scored like the ninety-ninth percentile on my test and they told me I could get into any
school I wanted. But then, of course, I took the physical and I was colorblind and I
couldn’t get into any school.

RV: And you had no idea you were colorblind before that?

RO: Well, I learned I was colorblind my senior year in high school when I took an
art class. When I was mixing oranges and greens and I thought it was the same color.
(Laughs) Being an artist, it was really hard to be colorblind. (Laughs)

RV: Right. (Laughs) But you were still naturally good at art.

RO: Oh, yeah. I know what to do with the colors. If there’s somebody there tell
me what to do I could do it. In fact, I still do a lot of that now.
RV: Well, tell me about leaving Albuquerque and then going into the basic training. This is 1969, is that correct?

RO: This is March of ’69 and I couldn’t leave any sooner. If I could have left sooner I would have. On March 3, 1969, I went in and we went to basic training. And I had my friends at college who went a couple of weeks ahead of me and they were in another company. I went to basic training and it was really Mickey Mouse. I really didn’t like the Navy. In fact, when we were training for the Navy they had us training through these mock ships. And being an outdoors person like I was, used to the outdoors and the Rocky Mountains that I loved, I loved camping. In fact, one summer I worked all summer in a camp living in a tent when I was fifteen and I could not see myself locked in a ship. And being disqualified for most schools, I was becoming very disillusioned again. Until they started coming out with the hospital corps, and they said that they would waive the color vision requirements for the hospital corps. But in order to get into the hospital corps I would have to volunteer because the Marines used the hospital corpsmen for their own medics. And to me, that would mean going to land. And if it meant going to war, so much the better because I was used to so much excitement anyway and adventure. When I was eleven years old I had a ruptured appendix and I had to go back in one week later for another operation I almost didn’t survive. When I was twelve I was in a real bad airplane wreck and I almost didn’t survive that. I was laid up for about six months. When I was nineteen we built a dune buggy, some friends of mine, and we wrecked it and I was laid up for a long time. It was right before I went into the military (laughs) and I was really messed up. I rode rodeo and I did a lot of really high-adventure things and I loved adventure. So when they came out with the hospital corps asking for volunteers and knowing that you would serve with both the Marine Corps and Navy, I knew that I would disappoint my dad, but I just couldn’t stand the Navy. I just thought I would become claustrophobic. I just didn’t like the fact that they were so non-physical in the Navy. You go to schools and go to schools and their training actually got out of shape. I would have to exercise at night to stay halfway in shape because they did not have the physical requirements that I thought they would have.

RV: And you wanted the physical requirements.
RO: Oh, yeah. Being in athletics, every night I’d do like twenty or thirty chin-ups and a hundred push-ups and three-hundred sit-ups and that was before I went to bed. Because I’d have to do that to be halfway in shape. We were state champions in cross-country and I had a school record in the mile, so I loved it. Anyway, so the hospital corps was a way of getting into the Marine Corps, which I would have liked to have done anyway. But just to honor my father I didn’t. And this way, being colorblind, I couldn’t get into any school. The hospital corps, that would be my excuse.

RV: It sounds like it was almost your fate.

RO: Yeah, it was. But I knew nothing about medicine, which made it even more exciting. I thought, “Wow, this is something I don’t know anything about. It will be fun.” So then I volunteered and then one of my friends who I went to college with, he also went into the corps. We talked it over together and there were several of us from New Mexico. In fact, there were four of us from New Mexico. We decided we were all going to go into the hospital corps together. I cut my leave short so that I could get into the same class as my friends.

RV: So where were you for the basic with the Navy?

RO: San Diego.

RV: San Diego. And then where did you go for the hospital training?

RO: San Diego.

RV: Okay, you stayed right there.

RO: Yeah.

RV: Tell me about the reaction of your father especially, once he found out.

RO: Well, he didn’t get angry or upset or anything. I told him that the only problem is that I went with the Marine Corps. And he looked at me and he was very, very quiet and he just said, “Well, whatever you do, just be careful.” That’s all he said. It was not a bad reaction. I didn’t feel like fear going home. He didn’t act disappointed, but I knew that he was disappointed.

RV: Probably scared for you.

RO: Oh, yeah, very scared. See, I didn’t realize what he was scared for. I had no idea what war was like and to me it was just nothing but an adventure at the time.

(Laughs)
RV: Well, tell me about the hospital corps training.

RO: It was very good and very intense. I enjoyed it immensely. We went to the hospital corps training and then right after the hospital corps training we received our orders. My orders were to field medical school to go with the Marine Corps. And then from there I went to Camp Pendleton and trained in Camp Pendleton. And that training I began to like because it was a little bit more physical. We did a lot of marching and a lot of running in which I excelled in. Those of us that were in sports just felt that at least we were doing something physical.

RV: Can you describe a little bit about what that initial corps training was?

RO: Well, we learned field medicine. We also learned Marine Corps discipline. We had a Marine Corps DI (drill instructor) who’d shout at you and yell at you. And because of the discipline at home that I had, military discipline never even phased me. If my dad told me to do something I knew I had to do it and that was it.

RV: Now this was the initial hospital corps training or was this at Pendleton?

RO: Camp Pendleton. Well, hospital corps training was still Navy and so there was not much military in that. In the Navy hospital corps we went to class all day long and we were off all evening. I played basketball five days a week after school. We’d play for about two or three hours after school every evening. In the weekends we’d go into town. I earned more than most people because of my college I had more rank and so I earned a total of a hundred and twenty-two dollars and month where they earned sixty dollars a month. So I had a sixty-dollar paycheck and they would have a thirty-dollar paycheck. (Laughs) Which wasn’t anything and I sent half of mine home. (Laughs) So we’d go into town and buy bologna and Cokes and go to the beach and spend the night at an all-night theater. Pay fifty cents for a triple-feature movie and we’d sleep there. (Laughs) Just typical military kid stuff. We just enjoyed ourselves.

RV: It sounds like it. So when you left that you went to field medical school in the same place, in San Diego?

RO: No, this was in Camp Pendleton.

RV: Okay, Camp Pendleton. Tell me a little bit about that training.

RO: It was by Oceanside. When we were there we lived like Marine Corps boot camp people. We slept in close quarters, we had early morning reveille, we had early
morning physical training, the PT. We had to do a lot of Marine Corps exercises, rifle,  
barbed wire, and machine guns were over you. Learned military strategy, plus also we  
learned a lot of field medical strategy and how to start IVs at dark on each other out in the  
field. We had a lot of classroom and it was intermingled with just a lot of good PT. We  
didn’t have leave. We couldn’t go into town every night. We only went into town just  
once every couple of weeks. And it was more like a boot camp than anything, which was  
fine. Most of us, I got there with my friend from New Mexico and we started meeting  
other people who were in boot camp together. We all had a good time. None of us really  
had any problems with discipline. So to us it really wasn’t even rough. Now what really  
woke me up was one letter sent to one guy who was in our company. In our barracks at  
night and he was reading that letter out loud and it was from a friend of his who was a  
corpsman who was in Vietnam. And he read that letter and it was an eye-opener. All of  
us were like in shock. He was telling us what it was like being out in the bush, the  
horrible heat, the thorns, the elephant grass cutting you, the mosquitoes, the malaria, the  
firefights, the thirst, the monsoons. He said that he hadn’t taken a bath in twenty days; he  
hadn’t eaten a hot meal in he didn’t know when. He’d slept on the rocks the whole time  
he was out there. He had his arms all cut up from the thorns and the elephant grass and  
every night he would fight off mosquitoes. He was on ambush almost every night, patrol  
almost every day, and the night was just as long as the day. They slept in two-hour  
increments here and there. We’re listening to this and, “Whoa! Nobody told us about  
that.” He was talking about the real war and that’s one thing I remember about my whole  
training.

RV: Wow. Can you tell me a little bit about the medical field strategy?

RO: The medical field strategy? A lot of it was getting us to learn independent  
duty, how to be the sole source of medical aid to the personnel out in the field, what to do  
in the case of battle wounds, how to treat them. Just the physiology and the science  
behind them and also sanitation, how to keep clean and how to prevent infectious  
diseases in a very filthy environment. And how we were in charge of all of that.

RV: Was it difficult for you to learn all this or was it a challenge?

RO: No, it’s always a challenge. It was just school and like with you. You’re a  
PhD. You didn’t learn what you learned right now your first year as a freshman. It came
in steps. And every year you just learn a little bit more. That’s the way it is in any field.

You start out with your basics and then you go to a little bit more advanced, a little bit more advanced until you get very proficient. It depends on how you want to go.

RV: What else about the Marine Corps training, outside of that, do you remember the most?

RO: The camaraderie. The Marines were really stuck together. They were very, very disciplined. They never left anybody behind. They had a tremendous esprit de corps in that they all took pride in what they did and that’s what really impressed me.

RV: How were you with the weapons? You hunted as kids.

RO: Oh, it was second nature. I mean, I was a sharpshooter at fifteen years old.

RV: So that was a piece of cake for you.

RO: Yeah, it was nothing. The weapons were—to me it was just fun, that’s all.

RV: Well, after this training where did you go?

RO: I went to Long Beach Naval Hospital and worked on the ward there. I worked in intensive care and worked there until 1970, towards the summer of 1970, when I finally got my orders to go to Vietnam. We had lived in apartments. It was really not like the military. It was like we were working just in the hospital. The only uniforms we wore were just the white pants and a zippered smock when we went to work and that was it. (Laughs) We didn’t have inspections, we didn’t stay in barracks. It was just like living as a civilian but it was still Navy. Mind you, we had some military there, but it was learning more on the job there. As time went on, I thought for sure that we were not going to go to Vietnam because Nixon was already starting to withdraw the troops and this was already 1970. And we thought for sure and had heard all the stories of all the guys who had been there during Tet and all that who were stationed with us. And so it looked pretty quiet and pretty dead as far as Vietnam. The coverage was becoming less and less on television so we figured that the involvement of the military was less and less.

RV: So you all kept up with what was happening with the war?

RO: Of course, yeah. And none of us were getting sent over and so it looked like that was going to be it for us. The war was going to be over by the time we were put in. So none of us were actually even thinking that we would spend time in Vietnam. My dad
was the same way, too. He said, “Oh, good. It looks like you won’t be going.” You
know, we didn’t mind not going. We were having too much fun in California.
RV: What did you think of Richard Nixon?
RO: Richard Nixon? Again here, too, as a young person you have little ideas here
and there, and politics wasn’t really a big thing for me at the time. Richard Nixon seemed
to try his best to pull the troops out just like everybody wanted him to, but I thought that
he was giving in too much to our country. He was pretty much of an ambassador to the
world, which was impressive. But he lacked so much charisma that it will be generations
before people will understand the true value of him, the true worth of Richard Nixon. I
think he was a much greater man than what the country, still even to this day, accepts
because they think of him as just a mediocre president. At the time when he was
president I thought he was a mediocre president. (Laughs) But that was at the time.
RV: Right. So the drawdown is going on. Vietnamization is a new word being
introduced to the American public, the Paris peace talks are going on. And you saw
yourself and your friends as relatively safe from not being deployed, but you got the
orders in 1970. What was your reaction to that and what happened?
RO: Well, we had thirty days leave to go home and we all went home and broke
the news to our families. My brother was in California at the time and he was staying
with me. And he was the first to know and he went home right away and he didn’t tell
my parents. So I went home and I told them. I pretty much told them, “It looks like it’s
going to be pretty quiet out there and I may be working at a hospital or something,"
although I didn’t know. They treated me like a young man. They didn’t overwhelm me
or make me feel real bad by crying in front of me and all that. When I was at the airport
and leaving they shed some tears and they prayed for me. But they were very, very
supportive, very supportive. I didn’t feel really sad like I broke their hearts or anything
and I felt like I had their moral support.
RV: How did you feel coming home and being with them and not knowing what
lay ahead for you?
RO: I was innocently excited and kind of looking forward to it. It was like
looking forward to another adventure. I started trying to run at the hottest time of the day
to get used to the heat. I put in five or six miles running. I just tried my best to prepare in
that way. But not knowing what to expect, to me it was just another adventure at the
time.

RV: What were your orders specifically?
RO: The 1st Marine Division, DaNang.
RV: Very ominous.
RO: Yeah. (Laughs)
RV: What did you think about that order?
RO: I had no idea where DaNang was. All I knew was I was training with the
Marine Corps. And the story that I heard was that I would probably be out in the bush for
a short time and then back in the rear.

RV: When did you actually go over?
RO: July of 1970.
RV: Describe the flight over and your feelings and what you witnessed on the
plane.

RO: It was seventeen hours. We made one quick stop to Hawaii and I quickly got
into the airport and got a postcard and mailed it from Hawaii to my folks. Fifteen
minutes in Hawaii and that was it. (Laughs) And then we made a quick stop in Guam
and from there we went on into DaNang. Most of us didn’t know each other. Actually, I
went there with my friend from New Mexico who we were in college together. We were
not in boot camp, he was a couple of weeks ahead. But we went to corps school together,
we went to field medical school together and were stationed in Long Beach together. We
both got orders and so we were actually going over to Vietnam together. But we really
didn’t talk about it. I read a book the whole way through. Nobody was really speaking
too much about it. We didn’t know what to expect. But when we arrived I remember as
the plane was going down seeing all these thatched and tin-roofed houses and I said, “My
goodness. It looks like a lot of poverty there.” And then we landed and then the door
opened and we stepped out and it was a 127 degrees, a hundred percent humidity, and I
had never, never been in a place so hot in my life. And I said, “Whoa! Welcome to
Vietnam. Welcome to DaNang in 1970.”

RV: Who greeted you and how did you get processed in?
RO: Oh, it was this young man. He was a Marine corporal that greeted us. Took all of us in a little truck to go to the clothing center and the barracks. It was totally un-airconditioned, just a fan. I just couldn’t believe the heat and I was just drenched in sweat. We were there. Have you read my book?

RV: Yes. I haven’t read the whole thing but I’ve read the majority of it. I’ve read a lot of it.

RO: Okay, in the initial part was just the part that really just hit me and it created the template for the rest of the tour. As I walked into the barracks on the dirt floor, I tripped over this thing on the ground. It turned out to be this soldier who was very dirty and very filthy. He looked at me and I didn’t have my Marine Corps uniform because I wasn’t issued a Marine Corps uniform. I only had my fatigues, or what they called utilities, and I didn’t have a dress travel uniform. So I had to wear my whites. And I had my Navy whites there and he looked at me and he said, “Are you a corpsman?” I said, “Yes, I am.” He said, “Look at me. I’m an animal. I’m an animal. You’re going to be just like me. I’m a corpsman, too.”

RV: How did that hit you?

RO: Whoa! It really hit me like I couldn’t speak. I looked at him and I said, “I’m not going to be like him.” I vowed not to be like him. I said, “My God, this guy is filthy. He doesn’t care about anything.” He looked mean. I thought I was looking into a mirror as to what I was going to be like and I said, “I do not want to be like that.”

RV: Did he explain to you why?

RO: No, that’s all he said. He said, “Look at me. I’m an animal. You’re going to be just like me. I’m a corpsman, too.” That’s all he said.

RV: Anybody else hear?

RO: I don’t know. I mean it just echoed in me and I was just so taken aback. I was just so taken aback.

RV: When I read that in the book it hit me as this was something shocking and happening at this weird time, weird temperature, weird place. But it hit something emotional in you, is that right?
RO: Oh, very much so. It really did. All of a sudden it was real. All of a sudden it was very, very real. And I thought to myself, “This is more real than I thought.” It was no longer an adventure. It was just a filthy, dirty reality.

RV: What happened from there?

RO: From there we were being dispersed. My friend and I were given the opportunity of either going to recon or going to a regular grunt unit. They tried to tell us that the recons really had it made and he and I both talked it over and decided that they were trying to snow us. And they really weren’t—I mean, how can the recon have it better than the grunts, than the regular infantry? I said, “That’s not true.” So we chose both to go with the infantry (laughs) and time would tell that the recon really had it made. The guy was really telling us the truth. He was not trying to snow us at all. We should have gone recon because they went out just for a very short period of time and they came back and they had all the food and they had all the equipment. Where the grunts—at one time we went out for sixty days without coming back. That was sixty days without a change of clothes, without shaving, without bathing. Sixty days without a hot meal, sixty days of every night just being in an ambush, sleeping in the dirt. Sixty days of not knowing if you’re going to come back or anything. That was a long time.

RV: When did this operation take place?

RO: It was several operations together.

RV: With the sixty-day period, was it early on in your tour?

RO: It was very early on, yeah.

RV: Tell me, going out, you left DaNang and did you join up with your unit then?

RO: Yes. We went and joined up with my unit. I was with the 3rd Marine Division, 1st Regiment. And we were greeted at the battalion aid station by the other corpsmen. We stayed about five days back in the rear. They were trying to acclimatize us to the temperature by playing basketball, by just doing various duties around because the heat was just so intense that we were just so drained of our energy, we couldn’t hardly do anything. In playing basketball we said, “You’ve got to be kidding.” The guy out there was a muscular guy, a corpsman, said, “You’ve got to play basketball.” Right in the heat of the middle of the day. And he did. They got us acclimatized.

RV: And how many days were you there?
RO: About five or seven days.
RV: Were they kind of telling you about operations and strategy?
RO: Yep. Well, not strategy. They were just telling us what to expect.
RV: Right. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Here’s how we do it.”
RO: Yeah.
RV: Okay. Do you remember what they were telling you?
RO: Nope. (Laughs) They told me a lot and they issued a lot of equipment to us and they gave me a lot of pointers, which I really took to heart. They were telling us how to treat the Marines, and how the Marines are your life, and you treat them well and you do this and they’ll treat you well. You both are interchangeably coexistent and dependent upon each other, and when you’re in a firefight you do this. Everything they said was right. So yeah, they taught us a little survival and duties that we had and priorities that we needed to make. That’s it.
RV: Tell me about any kind of indoctrination or information passed to you all about the Vietnamese culture and the people and what to expect.
RO: What was given to us about Vietnamese culture back in Camp Pendleton and other places, they’d tell us how it was a family unit. How they had village chiefs but that’s about it. They really didn’t tell us too much about the culture.
RV: Looking back do you think that was a problem?
RO: No, because learning it firsthand was the best way to learn it. They could tell me all they wanted what it was like. But I saw it firsthand and we learned it firsthand very fast.
RV: Well, Dr. Ordoñez, this might be a good time to take a break and we can pick up next time with going out in the field for the first time.
RO: Okay.
RV: Okay.
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history interview with Dr. Robert Ordoñez. Today is May 9; excuse me, May 10, 2006. It’s about 2:15 PM, Central Standard Time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, as is Dr. Ordoñez and I am on the campus of Texas Tech University in the Vietnam Archive’s interview room. And Dr. Ordoñez, you’re at your practice, I take it.

Robert Ordoñez: Correct.

RV: Okay. Well, let’s pick up. You’d arrived in Vietnam. You had met up with the unit with which you’d be serving. I wanted to talk about your initial days with the unit and then going out into the field for the first time.

RO: Okay. Well, you’re talking about just the first few days? How much time do you want to spend on this?

RV: Whatever you feel like you need to say about it. I would like to know how they interacted with you, being the medic for this group.

RO: Well, actually, to correct a term here, it’s corpsman.

RV: A corpsman. Yes, a Navy corpsman.

RO: There’s a big difference. (Laughs) Talk to any corpsman and he’ll tell you, “Yeah, there’s a big difference.” No, there is a difference. The Navy has a hospital corps in which you volunteer. They just don’t assign you. You have to volunteer and have to qualify to get into a hospital corps. And once you complete training through the hospital corps you can branch off into the various other fields. One of the fields is field medical school. And those people who become assigned to Marine Corps units have to go through a second course of training in field medical school. And all of this is a whole lot longer than your Army or your Air Force medic training. And there’s usually an on-the-job requirement, which you have your training OJT and it varies at various times. People are usually assigned to hospitals and clinics long before they go with a unit. And then once they’re with a unit they’re the sole source. The difference really is that you’re pretty much it when you’re out there. You don’t have any back-up help because the Marine Corps is a much smaller unit than the Army. So you are Navy trained with
Marines and you’re really kind of a breed between the two. You’re not Navy, not Marine
but you are in the Navy and you are in the Marines. The Marines pretty much adopt the
Marine corpsman and the Navy gives them up. (Laughs) So anyway, when you’re out
there, usually the Marine Corps corpsman is much better accepted than your average new
guy coming in. They have another name for that, it’s the FNGs (fucking new guys). But
anyway, the new guys coming in—when the new guys, when they’re coming in they’re
pretty much ignored. Nobody wants to know their name and they just kind of fend for
themselves until they prove themselves and then they kind of blend in. People don’t like
to befriend a new person because of the high fatality rate and the high casualty rate of the
new person being somewhat careless and inexperienced. You get to know them and after
a while it kind of works on you. So people, in order to protect themselves against a lot of
the emotions and grief that go along with warfare, they pretty much ignore the new
person. But with the corpsman, however, everybody wants to know the corpsman.
Everybody does. So you’re very, very well received and before you know it all the
people are kind of catering up to you, the various people and then later on you kind of get
into your little circle of friends. But it’s very interesting that they try their best to keep
you alive so they’re going to teach you as much as possible. But still they treat you like a
new guy because you’re green and you don’t know anything. And you get in there and
you feel very, very awkward because you know you don’t know anything. And
everything that you’ve learned seems to have gone out the window, military and
everything, and nobody’s really prepared you that well for what you’re going to be
confronted with. You go out there and you have no idea when to eat, if you’re to wash or
not wash, or how to sleep in the heat. And little simple things like toiletries and whatnot
and hygiene, you don’t really have any earthly idea how to deal with that because you’ve
never had to deal with that. Because everything’s really been pretty much regimentalized
and scheduled back in the States in your training. And nobody ever talked about those
little simple things. Like, how do you sleep when it’s a hundred degrees, there’s
mosquitoes all over, and you’re sweating like crazy and the insect repellent has been
washed off by your sweat and the mosquitoes are eating you alive at night? How do you
sleep? Just simple things like that. What position do you sleep? What happens if you
snore and things of that nature? So you’re taught these things and you kind of learn as
you go and then you’re confronted. Some people get confronted very, very early with combat. Other people, it takes them a long time to be confronted with combat. Contrary to popular belief, it’s not combat every single day. But you’re in a combat awareness every day and when you first get a glimpse of combat something really happens to you. There’s a big transition and change and you all of the sudden realize that you’re really there. Especially when there’s casualties and you’re having to take care of them. No longer are you really a new guy.

RV: What happened to you when you first experienced combat as far as your mental state when you realized you’re really there?

RO: Well, it’s kind of a little sad because several things go on with you. When you’re first there you anticipate combat and you hear all these stories and you think of the worst and you’re scared stiff and you think you’re going to be in combat every day but you’re not. And then all of the sudden there’s a lot of horsing around that goes on. In my experience, the first place I was placed in was an observation post. So there was really no patrols and no actual combat. But somebody would say, “Oh, there’s movement out there. Hey, Doc, got a grenade?” I’d say, “Yeah.” “Throw the grenade out there.” Well, they new what it was. It was a rock ape and I threw the grenade and the grenade came right back. (Laughs)

RV: Oh, really?

RO: But I forgot to take the thumb safety off and everybody ducked and I was standing. And they said, “Duck! Duck!” And I looked and after four seconds passed because it takes four seconds from the time you release it for it to go off. It hadn’t gone off and they said, “Thank God this guy is green.” (Laughs)

RV: So the rock ape threw the grenade back at you?

RO: Yeah, because they knew whatever you throw out there they’ll throw right back. (Laughs)

RV: That’s interesting. Why did they have you out there on the OP (observation post)? Was that just to kind of break you in?

RO: No, that’s where my unit was. I was assigned to a unit and my unit was there and had they been on the front I would have been out on the front, just wherever my unit
was. So I had to just be broken in with my unit so from that point on that’s the unit I was with.

RV: Okay. So you said that the corpsmen were really well received. I assume because you were the one who was going to save them, to work on them.

RO: Correct.

RV: And they really wanted you to know them.

RO: Right.

RV: Well, tell me about the first few days of being in the field and what you remember happening and you kind of acclimating to that life?

RO: Well, the acclimation had already occurred. We spent like about five days in the rear playing basketball and marching around and just getting used to the heat. Because I remember asking how hot it was and I saw a thermometer that said 127 degrees. It was a hundred percent humidity and it was just nonstop sweat. And from that point on I didn’t even bother checking the temperature because I had never conceived 110 degrees much less 127. It was just inconceivable. It was so hot it was just inconceivable. It took about four or five days before you could even function.

RV: What kind of effect did that have on the body for you?

RO: Well, you’re very weak, you’re exhausted, you didn’t know what to do and it’s so uncomfortable, you can’t rest because you’re so hot. You can’t sleep because you’re so hot. You’re so tired and you can’t function. And you have a headache because it’s so hot. You try to eat and the food’s almost nauseating because you’re so hot. So they have you playing a game of basketball and you’re sweating like crazy and can hardly do anything. After a few days you get acclimatized and then you can function. It’s still hot and it’s still miserable, but at least you find that you’re able to do things. You’re able to eat and sleep and do whatever. But the heat on your body, you just really sweat and you just have to drink a lot of water and that’s it.

RV: How much water did you carry?

RO: Most people carried four canteens. That’s a gallon of water. I carried six because there’s always the individual that didn’t have enough, who was suffering from heat exhaustion. And you tried to curtail heat stroke and so you had to carry a little extra water for other people. So I carried a gallon-and-a-half, six canteens of water.
RV: How often did you run into heat stroke?

RO: I ran into—well, there’s a difference between heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Heat exhaustion, I ran into that about maybe three or four times. But heat stroke, true heat stroke where the body quits producing any kind of perspiration, when you can die within a matter of a couple of hours, when it’s so hot you go into shock, I experienced that one time.

RV: You experienced it yourself?

RO: No, no, no, a person, a soldier, a Marine. I took care of an individual. No, I had never had any of that.

RV: Okay. Well, can you describe what you carried on your person as a corpsman?

RO: Well, of course your pack. And in your pack you had a bag full of medications and I put them all in one jar because the other corpsmen told me how to do it. Because otherwise they’ll get to too moist, too crushed.

RV: What kind of medication?

RO: Pills. You put Benedryl, some antibiotics, anti-nausea, cold-type medications, aspirins, Tylenol. Then you had your malaria pills that you had to carry separate, because we were responsible for distributing those to everybody. You had your battle dressings, lots of battle dressings. You had Ace wraps; you had slings, little cravats that you carried with you that were lightweight. You had a surgical instrument set that you would carry with you. You had a package of morphine with individual injectable tubes that you carried, too. Basically that was it and everything else was just—oh, plus the suture material for suturing out in the field. And you carried your food, which is usually about a week to ten days-worth and most of us tried to limit the amount of food that we took. We tried to eat one-and-a-half meals a day because the food was just so heavy. Half of it, if you were lucky, was canned food that was C-rations. The other half was dehydrated. Most of the time we did not have the dehydrated food because it was just not accessible. But you wanted to take dehydrated because it much lighter weight. You carried your poncho, your rain suit which was your pants and your jacket. You carried—I liked to have what was called jungle gloves because everything was so sharp with the thorns and the elephant grass and everything. And so you liked to
wear jungle gloves but you usually lost those. They didn’t last but maybe a week before you lost them or something or they tore or something like that. I went through jungle gloves about maybe two or three times over there. The rest of the time I just had to hold everything and have cut hands. You had what’s called a poncho liner and that was your blanket, insulated nylon type of blanket that you would tie to the corners of your poncho during the rain. You’d have your poncho, which was not only a raincoat but you snapped it together with another person’s and it was a tent that could hold four people. That was your hooch. You would also use it as a stretcher, too. You’d use it for a lot of different things. Your helmet, flak jacket, your ammunition. We carried ammunition just like everybody else and we’d have to carry mortar rounds because they’d be distributed among everybody else, too. Your canteens like we mentioned. You’d have one canteen cup that you’d cook everything in and you’d have your heat tabs and all that stuff. Letter writing—personal gear was very, very limited. They always tell you to take extra clothing but those weighed so much you really didn’t take extra clothing. You just took extra socks and maybe one t-shirt or something like that. Toothbrush, toothpaste. You may have had that, but most of those carried a strong odor and strong fragrance to it and they would give your position away, especially at night. So you really didn’t brush your teeth or wash because it was just too strong of a smell, that perfume smell. But I would carry Phisohex to clean wounds and Betadine and I carried Lava soap, too, because it had no smell. So you ended up brushing your teeth with Lava soap and taking a bath with Lava soap. (Laughs) It was all pumice and everything. Shaving—well, you didn’t even shave after a while. But I learned how to brush my teeth with Lava soap. But it was no big deal. It didn’t have that bad of a taste. It wasn’t like Lifebuoy, which is what my mom used to put in my mouth when I used to say bad things growing up. (Laughs) That was a red soap and it was horrible but Lava soap was tolerable. (Laughs) And diarrhea medicine, Pepto-Bismol and things like that. Okay, anyway, no flashlights. One person might have had a flashlight and one person might have a shovel, so not everybody had one. No binoculars. One person might have binoculars in the whole platoon. So we pretty much shared everything. Letter writing equipment, that was it. That was your gold. You carried that in plastic, plastic bags and guarded it with your life and washed
your hands before you wrote so you wouldn’t send messy letters back home. So letters were everything and that was really about your only true personal gear that you carried.

RV: Receiving or sending letters?

RO: Well, receiving letters, you didn’t keep your letters. If you lost a letter or if you were captured, the letters would always be sent—the communists would send the addresses back to sympathizers back in the United States. And those sympathizers, the Jane Fondas and all those people, would harass the families of those people and tell them that they were dead and tell them lies and they really just tortured them. So we did not keep our letters. We burned them.

RV: What about your uniform itself?

RO: Well, that said, you just had what you had on.

RV: Well, what did you wear?

RO: Well, you had—Marines used camouflage, pretty much what they use now, but the Army had the solid drab green. So we had a T-shirt, you had your jungle utilities, which is your long-sleeved jungle shirt and your pants. And you had two pairs of socks and your underwear just maybe one pair, the dark green kind. But it was so hot a lot of guys didn’t even wear underwear because it sweats and gets jock itch. But that was basically our uniform plus you had a jungle hat, which was like a floppy hat, and it was really interesting because of the culture. A lot of us would twist it and bend it one way and the other people would put a little wire in and do it another way. It depended what group you ran with as to how you wore your hat and everybody could identify what group you were with as to how you wore your hat. But anyway, we also had a little billed Marine cap and that cap really was invaluable and you’d think why would you use one over there in the jungle? Well, what it would be, is you would put it on at night and then you put your blanket over you try to guard against mosquitoes and that little bill in front of your head would create an air space so that you could breathe. So I used it at night so I could breathe.

RV: What about weapons?

RO: Weapons, we were issued a .45 pistol. But oftentimes we carried M-16s depending upon what kind of mission we were on and what kind of operation. I used both interchangeably, the M-16 and the .45 caliber.
RV: Tell me about the most common problems you ran into out there, speaking about medical problems.

RO: Medical? Just infections and what we called jungle rot around the boot line. You were in water so much and swamps and everything. People get infections and get fungal infections and skin infections and you’d have to scrub them and put antibacterial soap, Phisohex. You’d give them some antibiotics and just try to prevent it from leaving and keeping it there. We had a lot of concussions and a lot of cuts. Lots of cuts.

RV: Concussions from?

RO: People falling, hitting. Sometimes when rounds would go off they would hit their head or something like that of that nature. Sometimes even concussion grenades would ding you up for a while. (Laughs) If you got artillery or something a lot of guys would be like in a daze for a while.

RV: You said there were a lot of cuts.

RO: From the thorns, the rocks, just being out there, people messing around with knives, not knowing how to use them. People were always getting cut.

RV: Was there a routine every day that you did to kind of check out the unit?

RO: Yeah, there was. Like on Sundays you passed out your malaria pills and every day you just go through all the different squads within the platoon and just kind of go over the guys and make sure that their feet were fine. The feet were very, very important. You’d look at their boots and you encouraged them to polish their boots. That would kind of keep them from rotting because they were wet so much. But some guys didn’t want to ever polish their boots. They liked that tan look. You know that wasted look on their leather. That wouldn’t last. And so sometimes I’d have shoe polish and I’d make them polish their boots so they’d save their feet. It changed with the June monsoons and I’d make sure that they’d take their shoes off once a day, their boots off once a day, and kind of wring their socks out so that they wouldn’t get trench foot. Otherwise then they’d get water all the time. You had to sleep with your boots on and keep them on almost twenty-four hours. But if you would air them out for about ten minutes a day that would be fine, just taking your shoes off once a day. That kind of gave good foot hygiene. Every day they would come to you when they had ailments. So in checking them out you just ask how they are doing, how they are doing. And you just
made it kind of routine as to how they were. But you really didn’t have to make rounds because they’d come to you. They would be sick or something and you’d try to diagnose them and here you are a nineteen or twenty year old diagnosing other nineteen or twenty year olds. They were calling you Doc and thinking that you’re much older and you’re like six months older than them. (Laughs)

RV: Right. Did they call you Doc?

RO: Yeah, that’s the term.

RV: Yeah, absolutely. Did they ever call you by anything else?

RO: No. Well, the guys out in the bush always called me Doc. The guys back in the rear, they called me Squid, which is fine. In fact, I had them make me a dog tag that said Squid. I said, “You know what this means? It’s a higher form of Marine life.” (Laughs) And I said, “If you want something to do about it, I’m available right over here.” Nobody ever took me on. (Laughs)

RV: Spoken like a Marine.

RO: Yeah. Well, you tend to. When in Rome do as the Romans do.

RV: Right, exactly. What was the terrain like where you were?

RO: We were in the mountain-type range. We weren’t really down in the Mekong. This was in I Corps towards the north around Da Nang. Very, very mountainous, very jungle-filled. It was triple canopy. Triple canopy is where you have like three layers of vegetation to where light itself doesn’t even come in. When light does come in, the rays of light, you see the steam going around it because it’s so hot it’s like a greenhouse. Beautiful streams, beautiful vegetation, lots and lots of wild animals, very, very dangerous. Snakes, bamboo vipers, apes, and lots and lots of insects. One time we even saw a tiger.

RV: Really?

RO: Yeah, it was awesome. The tiger was making its rounds right around us while we were on an ambush. We didn’t even know it was there but we smelled dead meat and there was a tiger. (Laughs) It didn’t like the way we smelled so it left.

RV: Oh, really?

RO: Yeah. The large rocks, steep mountains, cliffs, lots and lots of vines, elephant grass, vegetation. Sometimes it would take you about an hour to go seventy-five
meters. That was with a machete. The point man would—it was lots of swamps and
swamps all over the place. We’d have to walk across the swamps. We were always
having leeches all over us and just stagnant stale water. Some of the most beautiful
streams I’ve seen, freshwater there. Just mainly that. Sometimes we were in rice paddies
down towards the villes but not often. Most of the time we were out in the jungles.
RV: Tell me about the animals besides the tiger. Were you trained to deal with
the snakebites and insect bites?
RO: Well, yeah, during the field medical training we were. There was just not too
much you can do. I mean, there were the pythons that didn’t bite. They just crushed.
There’s the bamboo vipers which were called two-steppers. Two steps and you’re dead.
And then everything else you could treat, which wasn’t much else. (Laughs)
RV: Right.
RO: So you tried not to get bit by snakes. (Laughs)
RV: How often did you see them?
RO: A bamboo viper was right by my side, right by my head one time when I was
sleeping and I killed it. That was the first and only time I saw a bamboo viper. I saw
some pythons out there and lots of pythons. Oh, and a cobra. Yeah, I saw a cobra. It
was going to strike me and a guy shot its head off.
RV: Really?
RO: Yeah.
RV: The insect population there, I’ve heard a lot about this. Can you describe it
kind of from a medical sense?
RO: Well, you know those little roly-poly, what they call potato bugs? They were
so big we could toss them like a baseball. They were the size of a baseball when they
rolled up.
RV: Wow.
RO: Ants all over the place, spiders, huge spiders, but there were insects. You
know when you have a very humid and warm environment you’re going to have a lot of
insects because they’re going to flourish all year long. There were mosquitoes every
single night, twelve months a year, every night, and just millions of mosquitoes. Flies,
flies were prevalent but not as much as you would think. But mosquitoes were not
present during the day for some reason.

RV: How many cases of malaria did you have to deal with?
RO: Probably about two or three only. But I’m sure there’s a lot more that I could
not diagnose. People didn’t even know they had it until later on.

RV: What was your relationship with the Dust Off teams? Did you have a radio?
Did you stay near a radio?
RO: No. Our platoon had two radiomen and we didn’t have Dust Off like the
Army did. We had the same CH-46s. The double-propped helicopters were used for
everything for us. We didn’t have Hueys. The Army used the Hueys. So the transport
helicopters were the ones that medevaced us out. So if we’d get into a firefight and have
to call the Medevac units, the radioman would do that. We’d tell them to call them and
we’d call them.

RV: Was it a problem that the Chinooks were so much larger than the Hueys?
RO: They’re not Chinooks. Chinooks are bigger.
RV: Okay, these are the smaller ones.
RO: The 46s, yeah.
RV: I know exactly what you’re talking about.
RO: The Chinooks are large. These ones were a little bit smaller but they were
larger than Hueys.
RV: Right. Was that ever a problem, the 46s being a little bit larger and getting
into the areas and spaces?
RO: Well, when I was growing up I was middle class. It wasn’t until I got to
college that I realized that I was poor. You don’t know what you don’t have until later
one when somebody tells you. That’s all that we had and so I didn’t think that there was
a problem at the time. We would try and find an opening where they could land and
they’d land it and it’s no problem. And if they couldn’t land they dropped an extractor, a
jungle penetrator, which was shaped like a large bullet, and it was attached to a cable.
You would flip down these flat bars on it that was actually like seats and the person
would straddle it and you would tie the wounded individual around the cord and they
would extract him out that way.
RV: Where were you in the column? Was there a position that you stayed in with
the platoon or were you guys operating in the company or did you branch off into
platoons?

RO: The biggest unit that we ever operated on was a platoon. And we had several
operations that were company-like operations but those were far and few in between.
Most of the time when we were on patrol it was squads. But in the platoon it varied. The
VC (Viet Cong) would always know who was where by what position you were in, so
you tried to vary it as much as possible. You tried to look like a Marine as much as
possible and not like a corpsman. Taking a corpsman out was a big deal because it would
demoralize the rest of the platoon. And taking out the lieutenants—nobody would wear
bars, nobody would give any kind of sign to show that they were really what they were.
The only thing that would identify me as a corpsman was my medical bag that I’d have
strapped around my neck. But what it was, it looked like retrograde, like explosives. So
I didn’t carry the routine medical bag. I just put everything in a different kind of bag.
That’s why oftentimes I carried an M-16 even though I didn’t have to, because if I ever
needed an M-16, if there was a wounded person I could just use his. So that wasn’t my
job anyway. But I would carry as many just for kind of camouflaging myself, so to
speak. So I would walk and I would walk sometimes point at certain times. Most of the
time you’re in the middle, is what you were.

RV: Tell me about being targeted, especially since you were a corpsman. How
did you feel about that?

RO: Well, the thing is people always say, “How did you feel? How did you
feel?” For about the first month you feel. After that you don’t feel anything. One day
the chaplain went out to our unit, which we were out at Little Hill and we were having
Taps for some of the Marines that had died. And it was like a little service and he played
Taps and his guy came with him and had a little service and then they flew off. And as
they flew off it hit me like a lead balloon that that was my home. That was where I was
going to spend the rest of my life likely because I would either get captured or killed. I
lost all hope about going back home.

RV: Did you really?
RO: You have to. When you lose hope you become effective because you’re no
longer afraid. When you give up hope you no longer are worried about the little things.
All of the sudden you’re very effective and it doesn’t really matter because you’re not
going to make it out of there anyway. So you’re going to do the best job that you can and
you lose a lot of fear.

RV: Was this something that you all discussed?
RO: No, what I’m saying is that this was a transition. It was like a
metamorphosis. As that helicopter left off taking the chaplain away it hit me real hard
that that’s what was happening. And prior to that I really, really was opposed to a lot of
the way that people talked, their language. I was opposed to the dialect that they had that
was a mixture of profanity, English, and French and Vietnamese. It was a typical
language that all the soldiers spoke and I didn’t speak that way. I really resisted. I didn’t
want to become like everybody else. I wanted to maintain an individuality. At that time
when the helicopter was taking off I realized that no longer was I an individual. That was
it. The saying, “It don’t mean nothing.” When a soldier says, “It don’t mean nothing.”
That’s what they would say to hide their emotions. All of the sudden I quit feeling. I
said, “This is it for me.” And I started speaking like everybody else. Actually I became a
better soldier at that time. It was about six weeks after I arrived. Because I remember it
was about a month or a month-and-a-half or around there. And from that point on you
lose fear. You don’t care. You quit caring about anything. You don’t dream, you don’t
talk about home because your home is there. That’s it. And because of that, you don’t
have any opinions. You just function and that’s the way a person survives because if you
don’t you’re going to be a basket case. You’re going to be very emotional. You’re going
to go crazy.

RV: I imagine as a corpsman that that was very important for you.
RO: Yeah, you have to numb yourself out in order to function. Because I mean
when we’re in firefights and everybody was pinned down, the only one that would
actually get up in the firefight and go forward would be the corpsman. Which meant that
your casualty rate was fifty percent and if you didn’t go nobody else would. And you
couldn’t care. You had to do it fearlessly. And the only way you could is if you didn’t
have the emotion. It’s something that happens to you. Like I said, it’s a metamorphosis.
So when you say, “How did I feel about this?” I didn’t. I didn’t feel anything. It was like, “Do you want me to do point? Okay, I’ll do point. Hey, I think I should do this. I think I should take this position. I’ll go out on patrol. It don’t mean nothing.” “Hey, Doc, you’ve been going out too much.” “It don’t mean nothing.” You just go out and you function and you become a good soldier.

RV: It was an unconscious process.

RO: Not even unconscious. You numb yourself out to where you have conceded defeat and in conceding defeat you become fearless.

RV: That’s a very interesting way to put it. Did the other Marines transition like this as well?

RO: Everybody did. You had to. And if you didn’t you were useless.

RV: Did you see people who did not and were useless?

RO: A few, a few, and we sent them back to the rear because they were very dangerous. I saw actually just about two of them and they were very dangerous if they didn’t do that.

RV: Tell me about your first experience with combat and what that was like?

RO: Well, it was somewhat of a little, like I say, transition. We had a little bit of combat in the observation post. But it didn’t hit me like it was combat. It was just a lot of adrenaline and a lot of excitement. We were out on this operation and we ran—well, actually the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) ran upon us and we had a night firefight. I didn’t see anything. I saw tracers going off all over the place and that was it. My heart was racing a hundred miles an hour and I was very excited. But it still didn’t hit me as to what happened. It was just kind of exciting. That was it. We were walking out of a—trying to get into some kind of clearing and when we hit some booby traps that’s when I saw the Marines get injured and killed.

RV: For the first time?

RO: For the first time. And I’d had a few that had little flesh wounds but that was about it. The explosions were going off and somebody said, “Incoming!” And I hit the dirt and I didn’t know what was going on. I was so scared and all of the sudden they said, “Doc, Doc, corpsman up! Corpsman up! Doc, they want you!” And I pretended like I couldn’t hear.
RV: Really?

RO: I was so scared. My heart was going a hundred thousand miles an hour and I was trembling, I couldn’t stand. And I could smell the sulfur of the explosion. I could smell the burnt flesh, the blood all over the place. Then this one guy with his boot, he kind of hit my head and said, “Doc, they want you!” I said, “Oh man, I can’t pretend anymore.” And I stood up and my legs were like rubber. I just fell right back down. I was so scared. And so I stood up again and kind of fumbled. And as I was walking I saw this person down in this ravine, I saw the boots and I couldn’t even make out what it was. I said, “Man, I better let the other corpsman.” Because I was new and we still had two corpsmen in our platoon and I said—this guy’s name was Jody—and I said, “I’d better let Doc Jody take care of him because I don’t know what I’m doing.” And then so there were these people sprawled all over the place and Doc Jody was kind of tending to them and I said, “Hey, did you see somebody down over there?” He said, “No.” And I said, “Can you go see him?” He said, “Doc, I’m busy over here. You go take care of him.” I said, “Oh, man.” I could not remember what to do. My mind was blank. I said, “What do I do?” So I had to go down to tend to this fellow. And I looked at him and it was one of my buddies and I kind of recognized—well, I saw his dogtags but I couldn’t recognize his face. The face was blown. He had a hole in his chest and I saw his heart pumping and he was gurgling and his thumb was sticking out of his shoulder. His hand had been shattered so much that the tissue and everything just rammed the hand into the shoulder where there’s no bone left. It was just the thumb sticking out. It was horrible and it seemed like every bone in his body was broken. He was the one that caught the booby trap. I tried to save his life. I did a cricothyroidotomy on him. I tried to create an airway with the barrel of my pistol and tried to save his life and I thought, “I don’t know what to do.” And all of the sudden people are saying, “Doc, why are you down there? That’s a booby trapped area.” I didn’t even know I went down there. So I said, “I need some help. Come down where I came down.” And I told them where to come down so then they helped me. And I watched the guy die. It was like I couldn’t believe this happened. And then all of the sudden I had this horrible taste in my mouth and it was like burnt flesh and sure enough it was a piece of flesh. When a round went off it went in my mouth and I didn’t even realize it and I got so nauseated. So we put his body in a poncho
and hauled it back up to where everybody else was and I started helping Doc Jody take care of all the other people that were injured. We had to place a perimeter because we didn’t know if we were under attack or not. It turns out we weren’t under attack, which is good. So I was shaken. I was just shaken. This was even before the month was up, before my transition.

RV: I was going to ask you that.

RO: Yeah, it was before. I remember the helicopter coming in to take out the wounded and the dead and I was wishing that I was wounded (laughs) so I could get on a helicopter. And then on the way back home—I mean we marched out of there and had gone through some water and there was water in my boots. You had two little vents on the inside arch of each boot and as I stepped over the water would squirt. And I remember playing a little game thinking, “I’m going to squirt this foot then I’m going to squirt the other foot then I’m going to other foot.” As I took a step they would fire at each other. (Laughs) And then I started thinking about comic stories when I was a little kid, about this one, this mailman who was a World War II veteran. He was looking at his feet walking and walking and how he remembered a time during the war where he couldn’t even hardly walk because it was so unsafe, and he was dodging bullets and all the stuff. But now here he was walking like ten miles a day. I thought to myself, I said, “Here I am, looking at myself walking. I don’t even know how far we’re going to get here.” But then that was my first exposure to, I guess, real combat.

RV: That’s an incredible experience for the very first time out.

RO: Yeah.

RV: A true baptism by fire.

RO: Oh, it was.

RV: What did it sound like? What does combat sound like?

RO: Chaos. Loud sounds. You have shock waves from the explosions. You have the smell of the gunpowder and burnt flesh. You have yells. Everybody’s yelling and some people are panicking and some people have it so cool and together. You end up looking at the people who are cool and collected and they’re the ones that are organizing everything. Some people have a natural talent for being totally composed under fire and
other people just totally blow it under fire. They don’t know what to do and that comes
with experience.

RV: Were these your sergeants and officers who could keep it under control?
RO: Corporals and just various individuals. Sometimes the sergeants would—we
had some sergeants that totally lost it under fire. We had corporals that would have to
take over. Most of the lieutenants didn’t know what to do and you had to tell them what
to do. Occasionally we did have a lieutenant that knew what to do. But the individuals
that proved themselves under fire where you couldn’t tell who they were until the time
came. And a lot of them were just the guys who were streetwise back home or anything.

RV: How about you? How were you under fire after you made that transition?
RO: Well, I actually did very, very well. I did very well. Like I told you, we
were brought up very disciplined, very loving, and had no problems taking orders. I had
no problems thinking on my own. My parents, both mother and father, trained us that
way, to think for ourselves and be independent and work hard. Growing up with various
jobs you had to make a lot of decisions and in athletics you had to make a lot of
decisions. So when the time came under fire, you had a tendency, a person like that has a
tendency to kind of take control and make sure that everything is run smoothly. So I
never had any problems and it came very natural to keep everybody cool and collected
and organized and make sure that everything was done right. So several times I had to
take over military-wise, too, whenever the person in charge was decommissioned and
couldn’t do it emotionally. So everybody always looked to me to take over in case we
had times like those. Because some people have a natural leadership and I don’t know
whether mine was natural or acquired. I really think it was acquired. I would end up
taking over.

RV: What was your sense of survival like? I’ve heard a lot of veterans talk about
this innate sense of survival. In that you survive for yourself and you survived for you
buddies beside you. Can you describe that?
RO: Well, I don’t know. I’ve never heard that. You know what to do to stay
alive.

RV: What do you mean?
RO: You know—after a while it becomes so common so almost instinctively you walk staggered. You don’t walk in a straight line, you don’t cluster, you don’t speak out loud, you don’t—even during rest stops you keep a distance between you and the other person because that makes a larger target—I mean it makes the target smaller. Because when you have a group, that becomes a big target. When you have individuals they become very small targets. You’re harder to hit. So you stay awake a lot. I mean you wake up very easily. You get in position where you’re always looking. You know what your terrain is like. You know where the best place of escape is. If you do get fired upon you already know what to do ahead of time before it happens. You have this combat readiness instinct that just comes upon you. If an emergency comes you’re automatically doing it. You’re rehearsing a firefight every minute of the day and in every occasion because you don’t want to get caught off guard. It doesn’t matter if you’re reading letters or you’re going to sleep. You know ahead of time what you’re going to do when everything hits the fan. And what that does, that saves your life. It just becomes common and almost second nature.

RV: You talk about the smell of burning flesh. How would you describe it?

RO: Well, (laughs) like a cross between burnt chicken wings and a barbeque. But the burnt feathers is really it more than anything because when you have hair it burns.

RV: So after this experience the first time how did you feel about your medical skills? Did you question or seeing this horrific wounding the very first time out, how did it affect you as far as, “Here’s what I need to be prepared for.” Was it something completely unexpected?

RO: When it first happened my mind went blank. I knew absolutely nothing. I didn’t even know what to do. I had forgotten everything in that short period but then after a while things started coming back and then after that I knew exactly what I needed to do. My training all came back.

RV: Did it affect you that your first casualty actually died?

RO: No.

RV: I mean knowing that you really couldn’t do a whole lot for him anyway?

RO: No, it didn’t cause me to question my capabilities, no. I never did question, even to this day. There was absolutely nothing I could do. When you see a hole in the
chest and you see the heart pumping you know that guy’s not going to live. And at the
time it just was such a shock. I was trying to do whatever possible and I just didn’t know
what to do.

RV: Did you talk to him?
RO: He had no face. I mean his face was just a piece of meat. I could see a tooth,
I could see an eyeball and gurgling, but you couldn’t make out the rest.

RV: Did you try to talk to the folks you were helping?
RO: Oh, all the time.
RV: What did you say to them?
RO: “Hey, things are going to be okay.” You calm them down, you just give
them confidence and you just tell them everything is going to be all right. To let them
know and you kind of make light of what’s going on. “Hey, you get to go home.” And
all this stuff and, “Nah, it’s no big deal. Hey, wow, that’s cool. You’re going to have
something to brag about when you get back home.” You know, that type of thing.

RV: Would you lie to them?
RO: No, I never lied.
RV: So even if you knew they were going to die, what would you say? “It’s
going to be okay?”
RO: It’s, “Hey, listen, just hold my hand. You’re going to be fine. God’s going
to take care of you.” That’s it, that’s all I would say. I couldn’t say anything. You just
give them some kind of confidence.

RV: What would they say to you?
RO: Nothing. Sometimes they would be scared. Sometimes they wouldn’t say
anything.

RV: Would they ask you, “Talk to me about this,” or “Please tell so and so this?”
RO: No.
RV: Nothing like that?
RO: Never.
RV: So why do corpsmen go forward under fire?
RO: It’s your duty. What I mean is that you know you’re the only one that can do anything for anybody and that’s you job and then you do it. There’s so much adrenaline involved anyway that you do it.

RV: I’ve heard that from many Marines, that the ones that they admire the most were the Navy corpsmen. Did you ever have discussions with them about your duties and what you did and why you were there?

RO: No. No, you did your best to not engage in anything personal about the way that you thought or anything. You talked about cars and girls and about the war at hand and the war stories and all that. One person I had any deep conversation with was one friend I had. You tried not to have friends because you didn’t want to see them die. Most people just didn’t have friends but you ended up with at least one. And we talked a lot about different things but we never really talked about personal things at all.

RV: Even with your close friend?

RO: No. Well, not really, no. Maybe plans, but that’s about it. You were so numbed out that you didn’t really bring up anything personal. No, not really. You’d talk maybe a little bit about your family and you’d know a little bit about their family and they’d know about yours. But that was about it. You didn’t get into any personal thing about how you felt about anything. You didn’t get into any kind of philosophy. But the kind of philosophy my friend and I would be would be about Agatha Christie. He loved to read Agatha Christie and I’d read his books and we’d have a discussion about them and that’s it. In fact, that was our escape. That was the only little vacation we had was talking about Agatha Christie and Hercule Poirot and his mustaches and the wax that he put on his—and he’d have a little brassier he’d wear at night on his mustaches. We’d sit there and laugh at the guy and just have a great time just making fun of Hercule Poirot. He saw that and I didn’t get that and we’d talk about the different stories. But as far as the philosophy of everything, we’d say how much we hated Jane Fonda and all the protestors and that was about it. (Laughs) So I mean it was very superficial. Nothing deep at all.

RV: Was this a decision that you made consciously or was this something that all the men did?
RO: You did it to protect yourself subconsciously. Just like today. Let’s say that you saw your grandma get run over and I’m sitting here saying, “Hey, I heard your grandma got run over. How did it feel?” And you look at me and say, “Listen, I don’t want to talk about it.” Because it hurts you. You don’t even want to bring it up because you don’t want to go through that pain again. It was so painful at first. And then other people say, “Hey, I heard your grandma got run over. Are you doing okay? How did it happen?” “Oh, I don’t want to talk about it right now, but thanks for asking.” And you drop it. Why do you drop it? Because it’s painful.

RV: So it’s almost a common sense thing.

RO: Yeah, it’s self preservation is what it is. Have you had anything traumatic in your life? Have you had a car accident?

RV: Yes.

RO: And how bad was it? Was anybody hurt real bad?

RV: Um-hm.

RO: Do you want to talk about it?

RV: Sure. No, I understand what you’re saying.

RO: You don’t really want to talk about it, do you? If somebody asks you you’ll tell them more or less and tell them how horrible it was but not readily.

RV: No, I don’t have that problem because it was so long ago. Does the time make a difference for you?

RO: Time makes a big difference.

RV: What about in-country? Did stuff happen at the beginning of your tour, were you able to talk about it more or at all toward the end of it when you’re getting ready to go home?

RO: Well, kind of. Kind of yes and kind of no. The people that you wanted to talk about it with already knew about it, and the people that you didn’t care to tell about it were the people back in the rear and so you didn’t talk about it to them. Like my friend, he had come in several months after I had been there but he was with another unit and supposedly his unit had seen a whole lot more action than ours, which is the truth. And then later on we’re almost ready to go home and I had been cited for the Bronze Star and he said, “Why?” And then I showed the citations of things that I had done before he
came and he looked at me and said, “I never knew those things happened. You never
talk about it.” I said, “Well, what is there to talk about?” He shrugged his shoulders and
that was it.

RV: And that’s how it ended?
RO: Yeah. You know, it’s like no big deal. Guys got killed and you’re trying to
save lives and that was it.

RV: Doing your duty.
RO: That was it and he said, “Yeah.” Because he knew what it was. We had
been through some rough stuff ourselves so there’s really nothing much to talk about.

RV: What about the civilians?
RO: What, here or there?
RV: There and then here.
RO: That’s two different worlds. Over there we didn’t deal with civilians except
for in the villages and they liked you and we learned the culture, learned some of the
language and that was it. But you couldn’t carry on that much of a conversation because
of their broken English and our broken Vietnamese. So it wasn’t—I like the Vietnamese
people tremendously, I liked the culture and I just wish them the best. But knew it was
pretty much a lost cause because once we pulled out I knew that was going to be it.

Everybody did.

RV: I was really asking about when you discussed your actions, the Bronze Star
and things like that with civilians, do they want to know more? They don’t understand
really what you did.

RO: Nobody has really asked me any detail. I have a citation here in my office
and it’s got the Bronze Star medal with the combat “V” for valor. And then on the
bottom it has got a citation and it kind of gives a little summary. It’s like about a two
paragraph summary and it just briefly runs over it. I’ve never had one person ask me any
details on it. They’ve read it and they say, “Wow.” That’s all they say is, “Wow.” And
then they don’t ask me any questions.

RV: Do you think they are trying to be respectful?
RO: I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know whether they are afraid to ask, whether they don’t know what to ask or what. I don’t know. To this very day, not even my own brother has asked me. Not even my mother. (Laughs)

RV: Really?
RO: Yeah. They’ve asked me—my dad, who is a World War II veteran, he’s the only one that really, really asked me any detail. And he passed away in 1988.

RV: We’ll talk about that when we get to that point after the war. I want to ask you about—continue with the Vietnamese people. What did you think about them? You said you liked them.
RO: Yes.
RV: What did you like about them?
RO: Well, their culture, they’re very family, very respectful, very honest, very loyal, extremely hard workers. They tried to have fun in the most desperate situation, tried to be very happy. They were in such dire straits that they made the best of it. They improvised tremendously, very pragmatic, they’re extremely intelligent and it’s just on and on.

RV: How did they react to you all when you would come in contact with them?
RO: Very good. They were very helpful, most of them. A few of them were fearful. But with the Marines they always like the Marines because we treated them very well.

RV: And they could tell the difference between you and Army and others?
RO: Well, yeah, they would see. And they knew which unit was which unit. And our unit had a very good reputation. They knew that we would never give up and ours was a very strong, forceful unit and so they always felt safe when our unit was there.

RV: And you operated in the same area basically?
RO: No, we went around. When we were in one place it was like for maybe a couple of weeks and then we’d go to another place. We never had a central location. We were what was called a Skylark team and we helicoptered all over the place. So we lived out of our backpacks and in a lot of jungles and a few villes here and there.

RV: When did you start doing that?
RO: Almost right after the observation post. Almost immediately.
RV: Oh, okay. Well, describe that. What was the purpose of it and what did you do? RV: We were always ready. We always had to have packs ready and go wherever they flew us. We went on one operation that lasted about four weeks and then we came back. We went to another place and then did some patrols out of that and didn’t go back to the rear for about two months. So two months passed before we even had a hot shower or ate a hot meal. It was a long time. I hadn’t shaved in two months by the time I got back. But when we’d go back to the rear it was usually for about one or two days and then we’d get called out again and then we’d go to a different location. We just went to a lot of different locations.

RV: And these are just going out on patrol?

RO: We’d go out and land and they’d chopper us out to a place. We’d land and do a sweep and then patrol out of that area.

RV: Can you describe what a typical day was like when you were out doing these things?

RO: Well, yeah. Okay, you wake up in the morning, eat a little breakfast, open up a little can and kind of figure out what you were going to eat that day. It was already hot that morning. Either you spent the night out on patrol in the night ambush or you’re back in the command post, the CP. And then you’d have your assignment for the day. Most of the time it was patrolling during the day. If you were out on night patrol you’d come in and at least sleep a couple of hours. But you’d be patrolling most of the time and sweeping various areas. In other words, you’d look for them and they’d look for you and vice versa. At nights you’d set up ambushes and you’re awake for two hours, sleep for two hours, awake for two hours, sleep for two hours. That’s pretty much the way it was all the time. You’d sleep as many as four to six hours total every night and always in two-hour increments. Your meals, you rationed them out. Like I said you’d eat one-and-a-half meals because you’d have to carry everything with you. And you’d just try and limit what you ate but you took pleasure in what you ate because that was the only pleasure that you had. There was no time for playing cards, no time for talking or anything like that. Most of the time was just patrols. That’s what it was almost all the
time. Sometimes setting up strategies, sometimes just with command post and just taking
care of medical things. So there as far as a typical day there was really no typical day.

RV: How would you get re-supplied?

RO: The helicopters would come in about once every week to two weeks. They’d
exchange mail, give us some food, C-rations, sometimes they’d bring a change of
clothing every so often. But usually about a month or so would pass before we’d have a
new set of clothing and by that time your clothes were so dirty and worn out with holes
and everything in them you just threw them back in the pile so they could take them back
and hopefully they’d throw them away or burn them. (Laughs) But that’s about it.

RV: Was sleep deprivation a problem?

RO: Was what?

RV: Sleep deprivation.

RO: I’m sure it was but we didn’t recognize it at the time. Sleep deprivation is
manifested by fatigue and apathy and inefficiency. Sometimes you’re just so exhausted
and it would be so hot during the middle of the day if you were in a little bit of sunlight.

RV: Would you describe what a typical patrol was like?

RO: Patrol, you’d have to cover a certain area. You’d walk out and you’d find
yourself out in staggered position. And you would try to cover certain areas and really
what you were trying to do was draw fire and you’d walk and walk and walk and look for
signs of enemy. And you would always call in your position as to where you were so that
friendlies wouldn’t fire on you, thinking that you were the enemy yourself. You would
try to walk into one of their ambushes so that you could know where they were so you
were always on the edge. You were always anticipating getting hit, anticipating being
mortared. You’d go through a ville and look for their IDs (identification card) called can
cuocs and you just tried to discover and that’s what a patrol would be. Hopefully, most
of the time you did make it back to your command post that night and usually you would
spend the night out there and the next day you completed the patrol. And you’d come
back in and set up an ambush that night. Sometimes it would take a couple of days.

You’d have either squad patrols or what they called killer teams in which there would be
about five to six people. Go out in a couple of killer teams and you’d operate in smaller
groups and move a whole lot faster and with much more stealth.
RV: What was the purpose of the killer teams?
RO: Just to move faster and to try and catch them off guard. You were harder to detect when there were smaller teams.
RV: How often would you all make contact?
RO: Not that often. You know, once every two or three weeks or so.
RV: Would you take some time and describe the enemy, the Viet Cong and the NVA, if you ever encountered them?
RO: Yeah. Well, the Viet Cong would engage in a firefight lasting a few minutes and they never really wore uniforms. They didn’t wear the typical black pajamas everybody said they did. At least, we didn’t find that. They’d always scatter and we’d very seldom find them. One time we did capture some. But the North Vietnamese Army, they were just like us. They were uniformed and they fought until it was over, forever. (Laughs) I mean it just seemed like it wouldn’t stop and you knew that was NVA because the firefight would keep on going and keep on going and they wouldn’t give up their position.
RV: How often did you run into each? Was it more Viet Cong or more—?
RO: Oh, VC all the time. Viet Cong much more.
RV: And you said you captured a couple one time? What was that experience?
RO: Well, we smelled some food cooking. Well, no, first of all we were sitting and we heard some rustling because one of them was actually looking at us, or they were trying to see if we were around. But they never did see us, but we heard some rustling. We followed him at a distance and I don’t think he knew that we were following him and then he went to his base camp and there’s his comrades kind of laying around on hammocks and we just encircled them and that was it. (Laughs) There was only three of them.
RV: How did they act?
RO: Well, they were shocked. (Laughs) We didn’t shoot any of them. But we told them to put their hands up and they did and then they got down on the ground and the choppers came in and took them.
RV: What did you think the strengths of the VC were?
RO: Well, they could work within the population without being detected. They knew the land very, very well. They knew jungle warfare a whole lot better than we did and guerilla warfare, too. They could do without a lot and we had to have more equipment than they did.

RV: What about their weaknesses?

RO: Weaknesses is they underestimated us.

RV: How so?

RO: They’d think that we couldn’t see them, they’d think that we would not sit there and ambush all night. I think that they didn’t think that we were the way we were. If we’d get fired upon after a couple of minutes if they’re still firing upon us we’d do like a charge and go after them. Even though we were being fired upon and that scared them to death.

RV: They didn’t expect you to do that.

RO: No.

RV: What about the NVA? What were their strengths and weaknesses?

RO: I don’t know. Their strengths were in numbers and they were very, very disciplined. Weaknesses, I don’t know what their weakness were because I didn’t ever thought about it.

RV: They didn’t display any, I guess, is what you’re saying.

RO: Well, it was like fighting Americans. They were just like us. It was kind of scary.

RV: Did you all respect them?

RO: Yeah, very much.

RV: Did you respect the VC?

RO: Yes.

RV: And I guess this is in the sense that you don’t underestimate your enemy.

RO: Right.

RV: Okay. Tell me a little bit about, on the medical side, how long someone would be able to be out there without being wounded? How often or what was the typical timeframe in which someone could operate out there where you were before they
had some kind of incident? I know it varies according to where you are and how many of
the enemy are out there. What did you witness?

RO: Well, some guys went the whole time without being wounded. Most of us
did get dinged at least once. But I think about seventy-five percent of us got some kind
of minor injury. Some people were unscathed the whole time; maybe twenty-five percent
up to maybe thirty were unscathed. But most of us did get some little shrapnel or
something.

RV: So that was relatively common?

RO: Yeah. I mean it was no big deal. I mean I got shrapnel in my butt and didn’t
even report it. It was like, “Whoa, that was dumb.” I have a little scar there.

RV: Was that the only time you were wounded?

RO: No, I was getting out of a helicopter and an RPG (rocket propelled grenade)
round hit and blew me off. I was about ten feet from the ground and I landed on my head
and broke my nose and cut it wide open.

RV: Can you tell me about that, what happened?

RO: Well, we were coming into an operation and the chopper hadn’t landed. The
first guy jumped out and then I was kind of waiting for him to land. And he was about
ten feet off the ground and he thought it was too soft for him to land so he wanted all of
us to jump. I didn’t want to jump. I had about sixty-five pounds of gear on. Then I saw a
stream, a jet, and before I knew it there’s a flash and it was like somebody hit me and just
threw me off and I was airborne. (Laughs) And then I saw the ground coming and then
my helmet crunched my nose as I landed on it. I heard a crunch! And then it hurt and
then I landed and rolled over on my back and started seeing red because the blood was all
over the place. I had a concussion and they thought I was dead. I said, “No, no, I’m
alive.” But I remember thinking that it was the fault of the pilot and I was kind of crazed.
So I put the magazine in my rifle and I was going to shoot that helicopter down and they
grabbed the rifle from me. (Laughs)

RV: Wow.

RO: I didn’t know what I was doing. So they put me in another chopper after
they put a battle dressing on my nose. But it was really hurting so I got in.

RV: So it did not take the chopper out.
RO: No, I didn’t shoot.

RV: No, the RPG.

RO: No, I don’t know what happened. It was not that big of a round. I don’t know if it was a dud or what went off. I don’t know what it was that went off. But I had no shrapnel, nobody else had any shrapnel. So I just don’t know.

RV: Well, like a concussion.

RO: It could be a concussion but still they should have some shrapnel.

RV: Right.

RO: I can’t explain it.

RV: How long were you evacuated? How long were you away?

RO: Eighteen days. I was on the USS Sanctuary, a hospital ship for eighteen days.

RV: What was the Sanctuary like?

RO: Well, I remember we were flying across the ocean and it looked like we were two inches above the water and it was so scary. I had a horrible headache and because of the concussion I wasn’t thinking right. When it was landing, I remember looking down and I saw the ship deck going up and going back down and going up and it would go back down. I said, “This guy better land because I’m not going to jump.” (Laughs) So he landed and it was very wobbly. I had never been on a ship before and they took all my gear from me and escorted me to—I actually walked. I wasn’t even in a stretcher or anything. I walked to a ward and then they examined me and then they took me to an operating room and then tried to clean me up and stitch my nose up. The anesthesia never took and it hurt horribly. It was horrible, horrible when they were cleaning me and trying to stitch me. They were talking as though I wasn’t awake. It was just the most horrible experience. It felt like somebody had a huge tent spike and crammed it up my nostril. It just hurt so bad. The pain was just through my entire head and I said, “I can still feel that.” They said, “No, you can’t.” I said, “Yes, I can.” They’d give another shot and oh, those shots hurt. He was stitching me, cutting away dead tissue and I felt every needle. It was hard.

RV: Why didn’t the anesthesia take?

RO: I don’t know. I guess my adrenaline was too high. I don’t know.
RV: And you were there for seventeen more days?

RO: Yeah.

RV: What was life like there on the ship?

RO: Really strange. I could not sleep on the bed because I hadn’t slept on a mattress for months and it was like sleeping in midair. It was so uncomfortable. I had forgotten what it was like to sleep on a mattress. We had a tropical storm and I got so seasick it was horrible. I got in trouble with a nurse out there. She was making fun of me and I had a hidden grenade in my hand and I still had a concussion. I was sitting there and getting ready to pull the pin out before another Marine jumped me and took it away from me. So she made it her point to torture me the whole time I was there because I scared her to death. But I didn’t know what I was doing. When I was seasick she just came over and said, “The ship is going back and forth, back and forth.” I was just so sick.

RV: That’s a bit cruel.

RO: They’re very cruel. But anyway, I made friends with this Republic of Korea Marine. He was a corpsman also. He was there for liaison, for the Koreans that would go there. He would speak English and was also fluent in Korean because he was Korean. He and I made friends. He gave me a uniform. Then I made friends with this other guy who was a sailor out there. And I had to wear pajamas the whole time, which was weird. And ate hot meals indoors, slept in air conditioning. It felt like I shouldn’t be there and finally I got out. The doctor wanted me to stay. He said, “I can reassign you here.” I said, “No, I’ve got to get back to my men.” He was really perturbed at me and it was Thanksgiving Day and he said, “What are you going to do, leave today? It’s Thanksgiving.” I said, “Yes, sir. I want to go today.” So after a little egg and bacon I left and hitchhiked to my unit and by the time I got to my unit it was the evening. And that was the only meal I ate that day, was that eggs and bacon, and I didn’t get to eat Thanksgiving dinner.

RV: Wow. you were able to go right back to the same unit?

RO: Yeah, I had to hitchhike all the way to my unit.

RV: Tell me, while you’re talking about the Korean friend you made, tell me about the other allied troops. Did you ever come in contact with them in-country?
RO: There was an Australian, a couple of Australians and they were just as crazy as we were. All of us were young kids. There were a few Australians and Koreans and that’s all that I met out there.

RV: How would you describe the Australians?

RO: I don’t know. I mean, I didn’t see any difference between them and us.

RV: What were they doing?

RO: Patrols. They had little certain assignments but they weren’t with us. They were like down south and we just saw them just back in the rear. You know, we got patrols and all that and we said, “Do you guys do this?” “Yeah.” They asked us, “Do you do that?” “Yeah, we do the same thing.” “Oh, okay.” They were doing the same thing we were. That was it.

RV: How effective was what you were doing, the patrols and all of that and making the sporadic contact?

RO: Well, it wasn’t effective at all because we were fighting on their terms and we had no fire zone. They had all free-fire zones. You know, with something like that, that’s why it lasted ten years because we were fighting under their terms. We didn’t fight it on our terms.

RV: You mentioned a while back that you all would talk strategy or you would kind of strategize about the patrols. Were you involved in that?

RO: Yeah.

RV: Tell me about that.

RO: Well, I was a corpsman so as far as they were concerned I was like an officer. Even the lieutenant used to ask me questions. “What do you think about this? What do you think about that?” I had a lot of experience with a compass and mapping and orienteering and outdoor experience. I used to hunt a lot and I could outshoot most of the Marines. I was a better shot than they were. So they knew my background and so they wanted me very much. They knew I had some college behind me so that made me instantly smart. (Laughs) I just kind of mentioned it. And the lieutenant was, he was about a year older than I was so I was twenty-one and he was twenty-two. So he’d always ask me questions. “What do you think about this? What do you think about that?” And I’d tell him what my opinion was because I was not under the Marines. I was
under—just kind of like my own boss out there. And I didn’t have to do anything but I
would do everything. So for that reason they would ask me a lot of military strategy.

RV: Did you feel like you got more respect because you were a corpsman versus
the other guys?

RO: Oh, yeah. Definitely.

RV: Was that a problem with the other guys?

RO: No. No, I mean there was absolutely zero problems with anybody, except for
a sergeant and he disdained me. We had a confrontation in which he challenged me and I
stood up and I said, “Let’s go at it.” And he refused and so he lost respect. (Laughs)
That was it.

RV: What happened?

RO: Oh, he was just being a jerk and I didn’t like the way he was doing things.

RV: Can you describe it or would you rather not?

RO: No, I mean, it was no big deal. Just petty stuff, that’s all.

RV: Well, I’m curious as to what would make you guys want to fight each other.

RO: I didn’t like him and he didn’t like me. And when you’re in that position
where—when you’re in war you carry a lot of hatred with you and you don’t hold
anything back. And if you don’t like somebody you go duke it out with them. That’s just
kind of the way it was. It’s not like in peacetime where you restrain yourself. You don’t
have to restrain yourself. Like the gunnery sergeant was Filipino and very huge. He
knew my reputation and decided—he one time took me on when we were back in the
rear. He and I wrestled and wrestled and of course he beat me. But the fact that I stood
up against him, after that he respected me. And he would tell me, “Listen, I want you to
be promoted and I want you to do all this.” He became an instant friend just because I
stood up to him. We weren’t angry, we were just drunk and he said, “Okay, I want to
take you on. They say that you’re a bad dude.” I said, “Okay, let’s go at it.” I wouldn’t
give up, I wouldn’t give up, I wouldn’t give up, and he beat me. But the fact that I
wouldn’t give up meant that I won. And I won also with my platoon from that point—
because nobody would ever take on this gunnery sergeant because he was muscular. He
was much more refined. He was very fearful looking, fearsome, and not even any of the
other sergeants would ever take him on. But here I was, the fact that I did it, it didn’t
matter if I lost. It was the fact that I took him on all of the sudden gave me instant
recognition within the platoon. And it was sometime later that the other sergeant wanted
to take me on. So I stood up and he backed down.

RV: How often did this kind of thing happen within the unit?
RO: Not often at all. Well, I can’t say that. No, not often.

RV: And it was kind of a random provocation?
RO: Yeah.

RV: Just personalities clashing?
RO: No, random and personality both, but usually it was just the stresses of the
time.

RV: Tell me about that stress and being in a war zone.
RO: The stress? You know you can die and you don’t have any inhibitions. And
sometimes you’ll get extremely angry at an individual and you’ll tell them off. You just
display it because you have no inhibitions. This one guy pulled a .45 pistol to me. He
cocked it and was going to fire. I took it away from him and was going to fire back at
him and then I said, “Well, that’s Leavenworth. I don’t want to do that.” And I just
publicly humiliated him. But it was things like that that happened.

RV: How did you publicly humiliate him?
RO: I said, “I want everybody to look at this little mouse right here. This little
good for nothing.” And I just told him off. I said, “This little coward is a piece of
nothing and look at him. He was trying to shoot me and he can’t even take out a
corpsman.”

RV: And that put him in his place?
RO: Yeah.

RV: Why don’t we go ahead and stop for today?
RO: Okay.
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone, continuing my oral history interview with Dr. Robert Ordoñez. Today is May 24, 2006. It’s about 2:10 PM, Central Standard Time. We’re both in Lubbock, Texas, and I am on the campus of Texas Tech University and Dr. Ordoñez is at his practice here in Lubbock. Sir, let’s pick up where we left off. We had been describing or talking about some general topics, and I wanted to continue with that and just a few more questions about being on board the USS Sanctuary. A general one, as a physician today looking back, how adequate was that facility for your treatment and the treatment in general of the veterans?

Robert Ordoñez: Very adequate. You know, even today I’m very impressed by the hospital ship and its organization. Military medicine that way it was practiced back then and the way it’s practiced now, it very much accommodates. It accommodated the wounded, it accommodated pretty much everybody. The exams that were done, the care that was given, I think it was outstanding.

RV: What was the thing that, if you could change anything about that experience on board or that could be done better, what would that be?

RO: I don’t know. (Laughs) I really don’t. When I arrived I had a mild concussion. I was evaluated immediately by their on-call doctor and he was an ear, nose, and throat doctor, because I had a nose injury. I don’t think I was given a neurological exam because I think they totally missed my concussion. As far as the nature of what happened, I was so out of it that I don’t even remember answering any of their specific questions. I was allowed to walk to the various places, which I don’t think was a good idea because I was very unsteady. Then when I was taken to the operating room all I remember is severe pain. The anesthesia, the local anesthesia of my nose just was not working. I hurt a lot. To this very day I can tolerate a lot of pain. In fact, a lot of times I don’t even receive anesthesia and my pain threshold is very, very high. But that was a pain that I will remember to my dying day. (Laughs) I remember them working on my nose and scrubbing it and debriding it and sewing it and I felt everything. I sweated and I
gripped and I asked, “Could you please numb it up?” They said, “Well, we put too much
to much medicine in as it is.” I don’t know.

RV: It’s not working.

RO: Yeah, but it hurt. It really hurt. Apart from that, just being a physician, I’m
a little critical as far as the complete exam that they gave. But of course I’m critical of
everything right now anyway. (Laughs) But I’ve worked in emergency rooms and we
really have to be very thorough as to how we triage somebody and how we check them
out, and make sure that there’s not coincidental injuries or even non-related injuries. But
that’s about all.

RV: What was the best thing about it?

RO: The best thing? You got one-on-one care. The hospital—I don’t know,
everything was just so immediate and so complete. I didn’t like having to stay there so
long. But the doctor was reluctant to send me back because of the filth that was out in the
jungle and the infection that I had and he wanted it to heal completely. He was reluctant
to let me go. He said, “Do you want to leave now? It’s Thanksgiving.” I said, “I’m tired
of being here. I’ve been here eighteen days.” He said, “I’ll give you a spot here on the
USS Sanctuary as a corpsman.” And I said, “I don’t want to be here. I want to go back
to my unit.” He got a little perturbed, so he sent me out Thanksgiving morning and I had
to hitchhike a ride to my unit.

RV: You know, I hear that a lot from veterans, that they kind of had to find their
own way back.

RO: Yeah, we did. The boat took us to the shore and that was it. It stopped. I had
to go to an Army unit and it was Thanksgiving Day and they were reluctant to give me a
ride anywhere. I told the sergeant, “I’m out in the bush and I’ve got to get back to my
unit. I don’t know where to go. I don’t even know where it is. All I know is what the
name of my unit is and you can take me back to the firebase and from there I can go to
where I’m supposed to be.” And so he got some reluctant privates to get me in a truck
and they took me out to where the Marine Corps base was. I got there and told them who
I was and they said, “Your unit is out over here. Do you want to go there now or later?”
I said, “Why don’t we just go there now and just get it over and done with?” So they got
a jeep and sent me out to my unit.
RV: Was it difficult getting back with the guys?
RO: No. What do you mean?
RV: Well, just acceptance and being back in.
RO: Oh, no.
RV: What did they say to you?
RO: It was just like I hadn’t left.
RV: “Welcome back, brother.”
RO: Well, pretty much. Men are a little more—we as men are different than women. We show our affection with little remarks like, “Hey, Ugly, what’s going on?” Or something like that. “Here comes Scarface now.” Or something like that. That’s the way that males usually show affection so it was no different. (Laughs)
RV: Tell me about the relationship between your buddies. A lot of veterans have commented—multiple-war veterans have said they’re fighting for the guy beside them and not necessarily for the policy.
RO: Well, you’re in a war zone. You have no idea what the politics are. You have no idea what the logistics are. You have no idea what the overall success or failures are. All you know is what’s in front of you and what’s beside of you. And after a while you risk your life for each other. And that’s what you do, you fight for each other. Because you have to have some kind of perspective as to what you’re doing, some kind of cause, some kind of purpose for what you’re doing. And if you have no purpose that’s when you become very apathetic and ineffective. Whereas if you have purpose you go on and there’s no battle cry, there’s no “Remember the Alamo,” or “Remember the Maine,” or “Remember Pearl Harbor.” There’s none of that. We had no battle cry then.
RV: You’re not out there shouting, “Remember the Gulf of Tonkin!”
RO: Yeah, it’s not a short-term war. It was very long term. In 1970, when I was there, we had already been there over five years just in the war. World War II was over in three with America’s involvement. It was in 1939 to 1942 that was over with Germany, so that was four years for them. No, three years. Forty-five, that’s six years, I’m sorry. Six years for Germany, ten years for us. By that time people were getting very weary with it. It was already too long. People are getting weary with Iraq right now and it’s
just been a couple of years. So you get weary after a while so your battle cry is each other.

RV: It’s more of a personal motivation.
RO: It is. It becomes a personal war.
RV: Was it conscious or unconscious?
RO: Unconscious.
RV: It just was there.
RO: Yeah.
RV: Well, I guess you bonded through the combat, through your experience, through suffering with it through the good and the bad. How did you bond as far as any of your down time? What would you all do? Did your unit or did you have a particular thing that you enjoyed doing when you had time away from running patrols?
RO: That’s very hard because it depends on what you mean by down time. When you’re out in the bush, either on patrols, you’re out on ambush, or your back in the command post, the CP, you’re always on alert the whole time, even at night. There’s no light at night so you can’t read, you can’t talk. Your position during the day, most of the time you’re tired and you’re trying to sleep. If you’re not asleep you’re out on patrol because your sleep is really broken. It’s always intermittent and in two-hour increments. Sometimes you get four hours; sometimes you get a whole six hours of sleep. So you try and nap whenever you can and whenever there is down time that you’re not out on patrol, you are talking. People just tell stories and clean their weapons and you write letters and that’s about all that you can do. There’s nothing else. You read a book. This friend of mine—the only friend that I really had over there because you try not to make friends—he and I read books. Like I told you last time, we read Agatha Christie and that’s about all we did. That was it. We would sometimes philosophie, we sometimes shared our Kool-Aid, which was worth gold, and we’d get it from home. They’d send us little packets that were presweetened with sugar in and you’d just put it in your canteen and it would make one quart. I mean you could sell for ten dollars if you wanted to. People would buy it because it was worth it. You drank your water with your halopene tablets in them. So it always tasted bad. As far as beverages you just made coffee or chocolate and that’s the only thing that came in your C-ration. So Kool-Aid was like expensive wine
so you didn’t share it with anybody except your best friend. He and I would share Kool-
Aid and word was out. “Hey, those two share Kool-Aid. What does that mean? They
must be friends or something.” Because only very, very, very, very close friends shared
Kool-Aid. If somebody asked you for a drink you said, “No.” (Laughs) Flat out. “I’m
sorry.”

RV: “Sorry man, not going to happen.”

RO: Yeah. And so I would have sick call a lot and go over to people and tend to
them. Sometimes they’d have little things at home that they’d want to talk about so I was
really their counselor.

RV: Such as what?

RO: Well, pretty major things like Dear John letters from their wife. One guy had
been there already six months and his wife was three months pregnant and he went
berserk and started shooting everybody up. I had to—nobody knew what to do. Nobody
was going to approach him. So I went and approached him and took the gun away from
him. They didn’t have anybody to talk to so they would come and talk to me. I was their
priest, rabbi, counselor, father, mother, nurse, doctor, everything. And even the
lieutenants, their attitude towards the corpsmen was really different. Everybody’s
attitude toward the corpsmen was different. We weren’t like soldiers, but yet we were
more than soldiers. They knew that they could always depend upon us to cover them as
far as military-wise. But we were more than that. We were there for morale, we were
there for their health and to keep them propped up. So they tried their best—everybody
wanted to be the friend of the corpsman.

RV: You’re really their caretaker out in the field, it sounds like.

RO: That’s it.

RV: Did you like that role? Did you mind that role?

RO: Well, I had never been in that position before and I fell right into it. It came
very natural, so much that I pursued it for my lifetime career.

RV: Is that what kind of drove you that way?

RO: What do you mean?

RV: Well, drove you into the medical field?
RO: Oh, yeah. I mean had I not been a corpsman I would have never gone into medicine. I was majoring in wildlife management. I started out in architecture and I hated it so I was switching over to wildlife management. I loved animals. I loved the outdoors and loved ranch work and cowboying and all that stuff. That was my life and that’s what I wanted to do after I got out of the service was get my degree and get out there and hit it. But I had never been introduced or exposed to medicine and in that aspect and there I found it, that I had a natural talent.

RV: What was the most difficult situation or most difficult casualty you encountered over there personally? When you think back about that experience, what was the most difficult?

RO: That fellow that got killed. And I was sitting there just looking at this body with all the holes and the face almost missing and just a piece of hamburger and gurgling. And he was still alive and he wasn’t dead and thinking that I had to save him. I was just very green and didn’t know anything and it was just like—I just felt so helpless. It was like the worst feeling. You were sitting there trying to decide, “Should I save his life or not?” And it’s not like he was even salvageable. I had no experience with that. Now I know, but back then I didn’t. I was just a young kid. And here I was trying to do something to him to help him and then just watching him just die right in front of me. That was the most difficult thing.

RV: How often did you have to witness someone dying in front of you?

RO: Not often. Not often. Most of the time if they died they died back in the rear or in the hospital. Sometimes they would die instantly and by the time I got to them they were dead. But I guess he was the only one that was really a slow death. Most of the people just—the few others that died, which wasn’t really that many because I had mostly wounded. They would breathe their last and you knew there was nothing you could do. It was a head injury or chest injury or something where they hit a major vessel and you knew that that was it and there was nothing you could do. His was the most impactful. After that it was pretty much numbed out. After a while it was just one of those—just part of my job and it was very easy to take later on because I had already numbed out like I said. I just had not allowed myself to have any feelings.

RV: Do you feel like that was something you almost necessarily had to do?
RO: Well, like I told you last time, it was something that we all naturally did. It was self-preservation. You read *All Quiet on the Western Front* during World War I, you read *Red Badge of Courage* during the Civil War and they all went through the same thing. They all did.

RV: It’s a constant theme in warfare.

RO: That’s it, it has to be done. It’s self-preservation. When you’re confronted with so much trauma for such a long time, after a while, in order to continue that’s what happens. You go to an emergency room today and you look at the nurses and everybody talks about, “Oh, these nurses are so caring.” And all that stuff but yet you talk to the husbands of the nurses and they said, “They’re cold. Boy, there’s no pity to them at all.” Every husband will say that or every wife of a male nurse will say the exact same thing. You expect them to be all compassionate and everything. No, they’re not. You get hurt and they say, “Get on with it.” It’s like they’re totally calloused to it and the only time that it really affects them is if it’s somebody that they know. If it’s somebody that they know they usually don’t take care of that person because they can’t be objective. But you go to an emergency room and it’s not like ER on TV. It’s totally, totally different. They talk, and they do the work, and they’re very coordinated, and they’re orchestrated, and they’ll get to work, and things will fly around and all that. And sometimes they lose them and the person dies and the next moment they’re eating Cheetos and laughing about what happened last night, and talking about where they’re going to spend Memorial Day and all that. Not even thinking about what just happened, the disaster that just happened. But that’s self-preservation. War zone or not—that happens to everybody with so much trauma. And if it doesn’t occur, usually there’s a little psychological problem. Sometimes when there’s a lot of trauma like that, you’re talking about PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. People with post-traumatic stress disorder usually have an underlying psychological problem. Twenty-five percent of all people who are exposed to severe trauma actually develop post-traumatic stress disorder. And among those, women have twice the occurrence of the men.

RV: Why is that? Do you know?

RO: That’s just the psychological make-up.

RV: So do you believe that people were almost predisposed to PTSD before then?
RO: It’s not what I believe, that’s just what the studies show. Because after the 1980s a lot of work began. Your codes, your diagnosis for PTSD initially came out and said almost everybody that was exposed and later on they said, “No, it’s not everybody.” There’s a lot of research done into this and the research clearly shows what I just told you.

RV: Can you make some comments about drug and alcohol use?

RO: Drug use in the rear was very, very strong. Out in the bush it was very, very seldom because you had to be on the alert. But as soon as you got back marijuana was so easy to get a hold of. It was easier to get a hold of that than it was to buy a Coke. They would sell heroin to the people who would snort and in the rear it was very prevalent. Alcohol, you go through two months of not drinking anything but you’d come back and drink two cans of beer and you’re drunk. And every time we went back to the rear I got drunk. (Laughs) That was it. You talk about hobbies. Yep, that was my hobby. That was my pastime. We’d go to a movie and my dad would (laughs) mail some liquor to me.

RV: Oh, yeah?

RO: Oh, yeah. He was a World War II veteran. He would fill it to the top and then put the cap back on and really pad it to where the bottle wouldn’t have any kind of bubble in it. You couldn’t tell that there was a liquid in it. So I would have more than whatever. You know, whiskey or Bacardi. We’d go to a movie and I’d have a canteen filled with it. And everybody would pass their Cokes by me and put their ration of whatever alcohol because the enlisted men weren’t allowed to drink liquor. We just maybe had beer. So we’d go to a movie and the officers never could figure out how it was we’d sit there drinking Cokes and get drunk. (Laughs)

RV: (Laughs) So you were valued much more beyond the Navy corpsman. You were the supplier in the back.

RO: Oh, yeah. It was fun, though, because they hated us because we’d be out in the bush and the guys in the rear weren’t used to us and we’d end up in fights and it was always fights. Oftentimes we would be restricted to our own place and we couldn’t even go watch a movie because they said every time we’d come in we’d be rabble-rousers. So then sometimes the sergeants would just bring tubs full of ice with beer in it and just let
us have our own party out there. They’d cook steaks for us and our stomachs were so small we couldn’t even hardly eat a whole steak. We’d just have a ball and they would really take care of us. They knew what we were and they knew how valuable we were so they would really try and take care of us. During the day we’d be allowed to go to the Air Force PX (post exchange) called Freedom Hill. They’d have lots of stores, bowling alleys, indoor movie theaters, indoor restaurants. We’d go there, and have to check in our weapons before and everybody split up into little groups and we’d make a mess of things. (Laughs)

RV: Like what?

RO: Most of the time the MPs (military police) would have to send us back. (Laughs) Most of the time we got plastered and picked fights with the rear people because I guess you feel—you suffer so much out in the bush. You’re out in the heat getting chewed up by mosquitoes and ants and you’re in danger every time. You see your friends get blown up every day, every night, every hour, every minute. You don’t know if you’re going to live or not live. You expect things to happen any second. You live so tense the whole time and then when you come back and you see these guys taking the rear for granted you resent them. They call you names and all of that stuff. That’s all it takes because you know that they go to bed in their air-conditioned rooms and they take a shower every day, eat three hot meals. And to them they may hear a mortar round go off once every two months and to them that’s combat and they have no idea what we’re going through. So usually the people out in the rear, we called them REMFs, rear-echelon MFs, and that was their name. They hated that. Or pogues, rear-echelon pogues. We were called grunts and the grunts never like the pogues and we would go into the cafeteria and—they wouldn’t be afraid. It was just like guys being guys. If you feel threatened you’re going to confront. So they would mess with our food and everything and usually a fight would break out. So when we’d come into the rear the sergeants would be very, very strict with the people in the chow line to make sure that they treated us well. And they would post guards to make sure that they didn’t mess with us at all because they knew that we were volatile. We were on edge and we just had to come back for rehab. And rehabilitation was two or three days and that was it. Then you go back out to the bush and that’s what we called rehab. And they knew that we needed it. They
knew that we needed to be treated well; we needed to have a hot meal. Most of us hadn’t
had a hot meal in a month or two. Most of us hadn’t had a shower, most of us hadn’t
shaved or had a haircut and after that length of time we’d come back filthy. Most of us
would come back numbed out. Seeing combat and everything, we’d come back where
it’s relatively safe. You don’t have to carry a weapon; you don’t have to post guard. It
was brand-new to us and we were all young kids. Nineteen was the average age. We’re
teenagers out there and coming back in with that much trauma. So the NCOs in the rear,
the non-commissioned officers, they would try and take real good care of us. And then
when we’d be allowed to go into the rear they would just sigh. They knew they were
going to have to go bail us out. We’d go there and get into trouble. We tried not to get
into trouble. We tried out best not to get into trouble but invariable somebody would.
Invariably there was a fight. Invariably. And I have to confess that I myself got into
several altercations just because they were rear people. I was a normal person and it
really affected me, too, when they made those comments. I just was volatile. That’s not
my nature. I’m not a violent person, but back then I sure was.

RV: You did consider yourself violent or did you see yourself as just blowing off
steam?

RO: Well, I don’t know what you would call it when somebody gives you a
wrong look and you go back and try and find the guy and beat him up. (Laughs) I mean
I don’t know if that’s what I’m seeing or what. I mean everybody is trying to pull me off
and you have all these emotions that you don’t know what to do with. You’re out there
and you’re afraid the whole time, twenty-four hours a day. You don’t even hardly get to
sleep. When you put your head down it’s on a canteen and your mattress is your flak
jacket and your finger is on the trigger and you sleep. Any twig or any abnormal shift in
the wind or something and your eyes are open and that’s your rest. That’s it. That’s your
sleep and you don’t hardly get to sleep. You don’t dream and you walk around sleep-
deprived and fatigued all the time and you’re on edge and it goes on and on and on and
on. The longest time we were out in the bush was sixty days. Sixty days.

RV: That’s a long time.

RO: They told us that we’d be out a week at a time. I don’t remember being out a
week, ever. We averaged a month out in the bush before we ever came back. Then we’d
come back and it would just be for like one or two nights then you’d go right back out again.

RV: How effective was that? Was that a good decision from the command standpoint?

RO: Well, Marines are in short supply. They weren’t replacing us like they should have. They were trying to wind down and Vietnamize the war. So we weren’t getting replacements so our responsibilities were doubled. I was the only corpsman for our platoon and sometimes for two platoons. We were supposed to have two corpsmen per platoon. So I ran patrols every single night and usually you run patrols like once every other night or once every third night. But now I ran patrols every night so I didn’t spend much time at the command post.

RV: Can you make some comments about racism and racial incidents and if you yourself were subject to any of this?

RO: Racism and racial incidents, there was a lot of racial tension because of the times, were mainly in the rear in which people segregated themselves. We couldn’t stand it and sometimes people would get beat up. Hispanics would get beat up by the blacks and whatnot and some of the Hispanics would join the blacks. There was a lot of tension back in the rear. Out in the bush there wasn’t. You couldn’t. Your lives depended upon each other and we didn’t. If the guy next to you was black you knew that he had the same color blood you did. Out in the bush it really wasn’t like that. In the rear it was.

RV: What incidents do you remember back in the rear? Can you give me an example?

RO: Well, no, I didn’t spend that much time back there. But I heard this one guy was out in the bush for a long time, a good soldier and a good Marine. He was on duty and these blacks beat him up real bad and we were all angry. Even the blacks were angry. (Laughs) Everybody was. They wanted to find out who those people were. I remember that. Other than that the other things going on were not other incidents. I remember in the chow line. There was this one guy, he was from Los Angeles. He was Hispanic and he was sitting there making all kinds of snide remarks to the “White Swans” in the system.

RV: The White Swans?
RO: That’s what they called the Anglos. I got so upset with the guy and I called him by name and I knew he had never been out of the rear. He was just a rear-echelon pogue. I said, “Hey, pogue.” I talked to him in Spanish and the guy didn’t know a word that I was telling him. I told him, I just called him a coconut and he said, “What is that?” I said, “You’re brown on the outside and white on the inside and he got really upset.” I said, “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You just insulted my friends. You’re over there thinking you’re black and look at the color of your own skin.” I was so upset with the guy. So the lieutenant (laughs), not the lieutenant but one of the sergeants came up and said, “Hey, Doc, just go sit down.” (Laughs) But that was one incident and that guy got scared because the thing is he was a Hispanic and he was coming up with all this black jive and he didn’t know what he was talking about. Even the black people didn’t talk like that. But he was and I became very militant. He just did not—his timing was wrong, that’s all. But other than that there really wasn’t. I myself, nobody ever experienced any bigotry towards me. I had a Filipino top sergeant who really liked me and the lieutenant liked me and everybody else did. The blacks, the Hispanics, the Anglos, I got along with everybody. My friend, my best friend out there was a Greek, and to us in the bush color didn’t really matter. It’s just what personalities matched and that was it.

RV: Right. Okay. In warfare there’s often talk, or at least after the fact, there’s some talk of courage, bravery, and we’ve touched on this a bit, but could you talk about what you witnessed and how much of a reality that is when people, or say civilians, talk about or think about warriors being brave or courageous acts in warfare. What did you see?

RO: Well, I have a Bronze Star with a combat “V” for valor. I don’t think that I was a hero. I’ve talked to a lot of other people who are decorated and none of them think that they are heroes, either. Most of us were out there reacting to save each other. You have so much fear in you that there’s a fine line between bravery and cowardice. One second you’re on one side of that hairline and the other second you’re on the other side of the hairline. Some people—most people, if they’re in that situation would always react positively and they would be heroes if given the situation. So it really depended on what situation you were in. If you were in a situation in which you’re called on to sacrifice
yourself for the betterment of others, almost everybody would have done it if they were
captured in that situation. The bravery is there regardless. Cowardice is there regardless,
too. Because I can remember instances where I was so afraid I didn’t want to do
anything and other instances where here I was taking bullets. (Laughs) Bullets were
passing by my ear and cracking by my ear and it’s like, “Whoa, am I doing this?” So
bravery is there and cowardice is there at the same time and they’re twin brothers.

RV: That’s a very interesting way to put it. Was fear something that you saw
govern and rule some people?

RO: Well, if you had no fear you were a fool. Fear was healthy because it kept
you alert. However, fear unbridled was when people couldn’t do their work and that was
very rare and most of those people were weeded out. Sometimes in the beginning when
people were so afraid they were just sent right back to the rear because they posed a
danger. They posed a real, real big danger. But you had to be afraid. If you weren’t
afraid your attentiveness, your effectiveness was not up to it.

RV: Could you tell me about the role of humor?

RO: A tremendous role. We joked all the time and we tried to joke all the time.
We’d try to play practical jokes on each other all the time. You would find somebody’s
weak point, their little fear or whatever. If they were afraid of ants we’d always put ants
in their pants or if they were afraid of this—and you had to do it and you knew that you
were going to get razzed. Me, it’s like they knew I didn’t like to see people sick so they
would fake it and then pretend that they were sick. And I’d get so mad at them and
they’d sit there and just laugh because they would see if I would be able diagnose it and
when I saw that they were faking it, oh man, I would get upset. But we all got jokes
played upon and we all played jokes on each other and that’s the way we kept each other
going. (Laughs) It was really funny. A lot of the pranks they would pull were just really
funny. None of them harmful but they were all just funny.

RV: Can you give us some examples of some practical jokes?

RO: One guy, he would just go berserk every time incoming was coming in. He
would just cry and shake and everything. He was just so afraid. So whenever we’d go
back to the rear people would get rocks and they’d throw them on the tin roof inside his
bunker, knowing that he was there so they could watch him run out. (Laughs) He’d
always run out and you’d get in bed and he’d be so afraid and then they’d start throwing
the rocks. They were big rocks and they sounded really loud and hit the roof and they’d
sit out there and take pictures and put up little chairs to watch him run out. But he took it.
What could he say? He never got mad. Well, he got mad for a second but he laughed
with everybody else. Then with me, that Filipino sergeant, he knew how I was and
everything so he liked to pick on me. He was a very, very muscular guy. He was about
six feet tall and he challenged anybody in the platoon to wrestle or fight with him. Not a
fistfight but a wrestling match. And we were back in the rear and we were not allowed to
go to USO (United Service Organizations) because we had blown it the time before so it
was off limits to us. We couldn’t go down to watch the movie or the show because of all
the junk that we had done before. So we were confined to our bunker and Arch, for
entertainment, he said, “Let’s go ahead.” He was challenging people. And so my
platoon said, “Oh, the meanest dude here is Doc. Hey, Doc.” And they pushed me
forward. He said, “Okay, Doc, it’s your turn.” Man, I didn’t weigh half of this guy and
so we wrestled and wrestled and he threw me across, he threw me all over the place. I
mean I got beat up royally. But hey, I didn’t quit and I was half-drunk. I had him in a
hold several times but of course he was so strong he broke me off. Afterwards he just
developed so much respect. He said, “You know you never gave up even though I beat
you. You never gave up and you always come back.” I said, “Oh, that’s the beer.” But
that was kind of a practical joke of the platoon that they pulled on me. They had all their
laughs and everything. They had always said that they knew that I was involved in
martial arts. They knew I was involved in teaching personal defense. But none of them
had ever seen me in action because I had never fought with anybody. I didn’t like to
fight. So they wanted to see how I really fought and Gunny LaFifi, the gunnery sergeant,
nobody could stand against this guy. This guy was just built. But I stood and then after
that the platoon gained respect for me because I didn’t beat him. I got beat up by him but
I stood up to him. (Laughs) That’s the most that none of them had ever been able to do,
even at that. So it was a practical joke and they kept giving me beer and beer and they
knew what they were going to do. They wanted me to be drunk and get out there.
(Laughs)
RV: And they got it.
RO: Yeah, and they got their show.

RV: It sounds like you were pretty well-liked. Not just because you were the corpsman, but because of you.

RO: Probably. I’m sure. I got along with everybody.

RV: Tell me about—and you’ve touched on this already, but I want to revisit it—civic action and the civilians of Vietnam.

RO: We had CAP (Civilian Action Program) units to go out to do our little medical calls in which we’d take care of the civilians in the villages.

RV: How did you find them?

RO: Oh, I loved them. I loved them all. I loved the culture. I loved how they treated each other, the respect, the family units, the unity, the way that they respected authority, the way that they respected each other, elders. They had a tremendous sense of humor, too. They were brilliant; they treated us very, very well. It was just a tremendous culture. I loved the Vietnamese people. It was very refreshing.

RV: What kind of injuries would you treat or diseases would you treat?

RO: Oh, they had lots of infections and lots of booby traps and partial amputations. But most of them were infections and stomach problems. There were lots and lots of stomach problems. And tuberculosis. A lot of tuberculosis. You couldn’t treat that.

RV: How did they respond to you?

RO: Oh, very well. It looked like they accepted us. I was bác sĩ. Bác sĩ is a Vietnamese term for a doctor, even though I was not a doctor. They still called me bác sĩ.

RV: Well, you were there treating them

RO: Yeah, I was there treating them

RV: What did the villages look like? How would you describe them?

RO: Very primitive. Maybe one house had electricity. No motorized vehicles. Maybe one little three-wheeled Lambretta would come through taking supplies through. Most people did everything by bicycle and by foot. Water buffaloes were their farm animals. They did everything by hand. Most floors inside their homes were dirt floors. A lot of tin roofs, thatched roofs. Some of them had wood floors. Very neat, very
impoverished, but still very neat and clean. They would even have street vendors that
would sell little ice cream on a stick, which was water buffalo ice cream. If you’ve never
tasted water buffalo milk ice cream (laughs) it has its own flavor.

RV: Yeah, I bet so.

RO: They would have their little food that they would sell. That was basically it.
Interview with Dr. Robert L. Ordoñez
Session 4 of 4
August 23, 2006

Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history interview with Dr. Robert Ordoñez. Today is Wednesday, August 23, 2006. It’s about 2:12 PM Central Standard Time and both of us are in Lubbock, Texas. I am in the interview room of the Vietnam Archive’s interview complex and Dr. Ordoñez is at his practice here in Lubbock. Before we move you out of Vietnam and kind of end your tour per se, I wanted to know just a couple of other things about general impressions of the war. This is in relation to your own kind of psyche before you got there, as you experienced this, and then when you left, before you boarded that plane to go home. Can you make some comparisons about who you were at the beginning of your tour and who you were at the end of the tour?

Robert Ordoñez: Well, I’m very much—as you would guess the transition was very remarkable. Everybody changes when they undergo these experiences. Number one is when you initially go you’re very naïve. You may think that you understand and think that you have a feel as to what you’re going to engage in as opposed to when you leave. You’re already a veteran in every sense of the word and you’ve gone through an experience that was totally unimaginable, unpredictable. You had not anticipated any of it and having gone through it you feel like a totally different person. So when you first enter I was very naïve, idealistic. I was happy-go-lucky and thought I knew exactly what I was going to be engaging in. When I came out I was totally uncertain about life, about myself and everything that just went on. You knew that it was going to take many, many years just to decipher the experiences of what went on.

RV: Did any of your goals post-Vietnam for yourself, getting advanced degrees or just doing things for yourself; did any of that change because of your experience?

RO: Well, yeah. When I was in Vietnam that’s when I made a determined decision to become a physician. Prior to that I was bent on going back to school to pursue my major in wildlife management because that’s what I loved. When I was involved in the care of people and care of the wounded it showed me that I definitely had not only a talent but a tremendous desire to continue doing that.
RV: We’ll get into that a little bit later as we proceed chronologically. Tell me about leaving Vietnam and what that experience was like and how it happened.

RO: It’s interesting that you say that because to this very day I can’t really describe the feeling. It was like surreal. It was like coming out of reality into a dream and then realizing that maybe you just woke up. It’s like there’s this total reality and you can’t imagine what it’s like leaving the country. And once you leave it you come back to the United States and say, “Whoa, I just came from Mars. What’s real now?” It’s really confusing. You have life going on daily, people talking at night, no fear, kind of carefree and careless in how they walk, how they sit. There’s no imminent danger any more and you’re totally used to living that way. You’re used to sleeping with your hand on the trigger, your fingers on the trigger, and you wake up at every crack of a twig and change of the wind. Then all of the sudden you’re supposed to have almost like a festive attitude towards everything. It’s a very difficult transition.

RV: A lot of people talk about that transition, that you were literally out in the jungle one day and then a few days later you’re back in your hometown and you’re supposed to proceed forward with your life. Back at this point in American history and how the United States’ government dealt with its veterans and people who were still in the military when they got out of the theater and also those who got out of the military, there wasn’t really a mechanism set up to assist. Was there anything in place for you?

RO: No.

RV: What did you do? How did you do the transition?

RO: Well, I did very poorly. (Laughs) I still had two years left in the military and I had a month leave and I spent it. To this very day I don’t know what I did.

(Laughs)

RV: Really?

RO: I was just trying to adjust. There were some things that happened that were not real. I tried my best to adjust and I had a very difficult time doing it and I thought I was adjusting very well and I thought, “Yeah, I’m back to normal, back to normal.” But yet I wasn’t. Inside I knew I wasn’t but yet on the outside I said, “Yeah, I am.” I had to go to report to Pensacola, Florida, to a school that I was supposed to attend for about a month, learning how to give flight physicals. Right before that I was just getting used to
driving again and getting used to seeing different people and getting used to just daily
activities. There was one incident that to this very day just baffles me but I don’t know
why I did it. I saw this hippie girl that had a little sign saying, “Free cats. Free kittens.”
So I brought one home and I asked my mom, “Mom, do you want a kitten?” She said,
“No, son, I really don’t like cats.” She didn’t even know I had a cat. So I went out to the
garage, picked it up, got a bucket of water and drowned it.

RV: Oh, my gosh.

RO: Then I buried it and that was it. It didn’t phase me until years later. It was
like I didn’t have a second thought about it. I said, “I can’t put this cat out there to get
run over. I just might as well drown it.” That was who I was. That summarized it, that
one little act, and I didn’t realize it until later on. Then I went to Pensacola and there I
was in my Navy whites going to this school and just thoroughly maladjusted. Here are
all these sailors and very few of them had ever been in any kind of combat. Except for
there was one guy who was with the Marine Corps and he was like me. He didn’t say
much and I didn’t say much. We did not fit in the rear. We did not fit in that
environment. We went to school, did well, came back, went to the recruiting station
where I spent some time. I didn’t spend two years. I actually got out early. I really
wanted to get out of the military. But this is jumping the gun, your gun, your
chronological gun. But I just want to kind of insert this right now. The only way that I
knew how to get out was something technical so I got the Bureau of Personnel, what they
call the BUPERS manual, and I looked for ways to get out and there was only one way.
And the only way I could get out of the military was to get out as a conscientious
objector.

RV: Oh, really?

RO: I saw what it took and I went over everything detail by detail by detail and I
got out as a conscientious objector. The commanding officer of the recruiting station said,
“You know we’re supposed to give general discharges. What do you feel about that?” I
said, “It’s okay.” He said, “I can’t do it. I’m going to give you an honorable discharge
because you’ve done so well here and you did service to your country and your record is
outstanding. You’ve got a Bronze Star and I can’t give you a general.” So he gave me
an honorable.
RV: Wow. Did you discuss with anyone, this decision?

RO: No. I wasn’t really a conscientious objector and he knew it. He said, “How can you be a conscientious objector?” And I said, “Well, the war has just messed me up. I’m just opposed to it.” He looked at me and he says, “What do you really want to do?” I said, “I want to go to medical school.” He said, “Good luck.” He knew.

RV: He knew you weren’t really objecting to the war. You just wanted to move forward.

RO: Correct. And that’s the only way I could get out, so he helped me.

RV: That’s a very understanding commander. That’s a very interesting way to get out. I don’t think I’ve ever heard that before and the military didn’t smudge your name at all or do anything in any retribution, I take it?

RO: No, nothing at all. The only thing it said on my DD214 is it says I could not reenlist unless properly approved by some such personnel just because I had the CO (conscientious objector) stigma. But I had my honorable discharge.

RV: Let me back up a little bit. What was it like to actually physically leave Vietnam and fly out of there? Do you remember that flight?

RO: Yeah. We went to Okinawa. We staged down in Okinawa for about three or four days.

RV: What was your mood?

RO: Couldn’t believe it. Disbelief. It was quiet and very solemn. We weren’t overjoyed, we weren’t yelling. We weren’t ecstatic. It was solemn. It was like it was really happening. But the transition had already started long before that. My unit had left Vietnam. Nixon was trying to downsize and so it just so happened that I had to be that year, and he couldn’t downsize before. So my unit actually left and I was without a place. I had to be reassigned to the Air Force base and I was assigned to a barracks and the only thing I had to do, my only duty, was to report in at seven o’clock every morning. So my last three weeks I went to China Beach and got a tan and body surfed. (Laughs)

That’s all I did for three weeks. And they gave me orders telling me that I had to extend two years besides the regular service that I had, a year. Which means I was going to have to be in three-and-a-half years. I got those orders and I refused them. I said, “I refuse these orders.” They said, “No, you have to sign them.” I said, “No, I refuse these
orders.” The sergeant said, “Son, you’ve got to sign these orders.” I said, “What are you going to do, send me to Vietnam?” I shoved them back in his face. He said, “You’re going to stay here a long time, son.” I said, “I’ll stay here as long as it takes.” I was supposed to leave the following day and it took three more additional weeks. I finally got my orders and they said, “We’ll, extend you. You have to extend six months.” Which meant two years left in the service. “You have to extend six months. You’re going to take that.” I said, “Yeah, I’ll take that.” So I signed. Then my last night in Vietnam I took a shower. It was so nice taking showers. I took two showers a day as opposed to going to the beach. It was like heaven. I remember I just got to take a shower and the sirens were sounding off a rocket attack. I loved the rocket attacks because I would see what we called the rear-echelon pogues running to the bunkers and I’d just sit there and laugh at them. So I went up on the balcony of my barracks and I was going to watch all of them and maybe see a rocket or two come in and I saw this red flash come by and there was a rocket coming towards us. I said, “Oh, man. It’ll be just my luck if it hits me.” But there was no fear at all. Well, about fifty meters in front it hit and it was a six-foot rocket and it was a dud.

RV: Oh, wow.

RO: So I said, “Wouldn’t you know?” (Laughs)

RV: Perfect timing, though, for you.

RO: Well, yeah. It was my last night there so it was solemn. I couldn’t believe that it was over and it was over. It was another page in my life, that’s all.

RV: Well, after you get out of the military how soon were you able to get into med school?

RO: I had three semesters of undergrad left and I crunched all my pre-med into those three semesters and came out with a 3.8. I worked forty hours a week and was just totally antisocial. I just put everything, all my efforts into school and that was it. I just didn’t want to deal with people. But I worked nights at the student health center. This doctor was hiring veterans who had military experience and he would have them man the clinic at night. It was really, really kind of ironic that this fellow had hair down to his waist and a beard that was real long and was obviously a hippie. But he loved the Vietnam vets.
RV: Really?
RO: Yeah.
RV: Do you know why?
RO: No, we never talked about it. He just said, “You guys did a good job and I hope I can help you out some and let’s see what this job will pay for you. You just help me out and I know you can do it.” That’s all he said.
RV: This is in 1972, correct?
RO: This is in, yeah, ’72.
RV: Okay. Did you discuss your war experiences with anyone at that point in your life?
RO: Well, you know, I had a burning desire to do it. But when the opportunity came nothing would come out, and then nobody at the time ever really wanted to discuss it with me. I mean back then it was like as if I hadn’t even gone. Actually, I would have discussed it had somebody said, “What was it like over there?” But nobody ever asked that questions Sometimes I’d say, “You know, it was like this in Vietnam.” They’d say, “Yeah, well, we don’t want to hear it.” That was usually what it was.
RV: They would literally say that?
RO: Yeah.
RV: How did that make you feel?
RO: Horrible. Very horrible. It was like, “Gee, thanks.” I slowly became embittered.
RV: With the general public or with the whole Vietnam experience?
RO: The general public. Not the experience, the general public just for such ingratitude for what we had done and what we had been through. It was like somebody was just spitting in the face.
RV: What about following the war once you got back? Did you do any of that?
RO: Yeah, very much so.
RV: Tell me about that.
RO: Well, I knew Da Nang. I knew it was going to fall. We all knew it because we knew that the government was so unstable that they would not be able to handle it without the United States. So as soon as we finally pulled out it would be just a matter of
time. It was a heartbreak and I wish I could have gone back and helped out and kind of save that country. I wanted to but it was too late.

RV: So you actually had thoughts of, “I really wish I could go back and help.”

RO: Oh, yeah.

RV: Was this like April of ’75 when the end came?

RO: No, that was prior to that.

RV: Before?

RO: Yeah, An Loc.

RV: Oh, when An Loc went?

RO: That was horrible. I was always looking towards Da Nang. Seventy-four was a really hard year because you knew that it was over in 1974. Then in April of ’75 was when it finally—that was when the tanks rolled into Saigon. That was just horrible. My heart just sank. And people were oblivious in this country. I was already in medical school and I remember coming and then saying, “Hey, Vietnam just fell.” They said, “So?” But anyway, that’s something else.

RV: Well, tell me what you thought of the anti-war movement?

RO: Oh, everything—I think it was very hard for me during those times. It was a very, very hard time. There was a riot in Albuquerque shortly after I came back and the riot was—I never knew what it was but it was just an anti-war riot. I remember my dad had this friend who had a bar and people were getting shotguns ready and I said, “Dad, are they intending to kill people if they come in?” My dad didn’t say anything. I saw all these people foolishly and jovially having their weapons and “Why, if they come in here we’ll take a piece of them,” and that type of stuff. And it just made me sick. And these kids marching down the streets and throwing rocks and looting and all that. It made me sick because I said, “You know they don’t understand what this means when you start to take lives.” It just was so confusing to me as to why people would even chance it. The anti-war movements and all that, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and all that just made me sick. I just was so disenchanted with the whole thing. I was walking from class to class and they were having anti-war movements and the National Guard came in and threw tear gas. I remember getting tear gassed and I thought, “Those guys don’t know
who they’re throwing tear gas at.” Anyway, I almost ran and picked up the canister and just threw it up in the air out of just sheer frustration but I didn’t.

RV: What did you do?
RO: Nothing. I was so frustrated. I didn’t know what to do. Honestly and truly. My emotions were just so mixed at the time and I remember my eyes burning, and the tear gas, the sting that it has, the way it smells and the way it goes down your nostrils and everything. I just remember walking out of there and I just had such rage on the inside. I still went to class but it was just like in Vietnam when we’d go on a firefight. You’d say, “It don’t mean nothing.” And you just go on.

RV: How were your grades and how were you doing in school?
RO: Excellent. I came out with a 3.8. Like I said, I had pre-med, which usually takes four years. I did it all in three semesters. I crunched everything.

RV: That’s incredible. You were motivated.
RO: I was antisocial. To me, I didn’t even hardly care to sleep. I might as well study and that was it.

RV: Did you ever have any negative incidents with yourself as far as anti-war protestors and anybody saying anything to you specifically?
RO: Yeah, always, lots.

RV: Oh, really? There were multiple times?
RO: Yeah.

RV: Can you share one or two of those with me?
RO: Well, they were very cowardly and I remember there was anti-war protesting and I said, “What are you going to do if a Vietnam vet approaches you?” I was just very angry. They said, “Well, we’re going to embrace him, brother,” and all that. I remember one time at a bar there was this guy with his braids on and all this weird talk. I approached him and I knew some of them and I knew who they were. I said, “You know where I spent the last year?” I was already drinking beer and everything. I was kind of drunk. He said, “No, brother, where have you been?” I said, “Vietnam. You guys talk about anti-war and all that. I’d like to take each one of you out there to the war and see what kind of cowards you’d be.” There was just silence. I was edgy. I was ready for a fight. I said, “In fact, I’d like to take one of you outside right now and see if you’d like to
see what a war looks like. Come on.” And, of course, nobody stood up because there
was fire in my eyes and they could tell I would kill them. It was bad. Actually I hadn’t
even thought about it until now, until you talked to me. Yeah, those were bad times,
very, very bad. Girls wouldn’t date me or they went out with me once and when they
found out I was veteran that was it. They stopped right there.

RV: Did they usually ask you or did you tell them?
RO: No, just somebody made a comment or something. Or like I had a
camouflage shirt that I wore when I rode my motorcycle. They’d say, “Oh, that’s cool.
Where’d you get that?” I said, “Nam.” And that was it. I’d never see them again.

RV: When did you start emerging out of the antisocial behavior?
RO: When I got a—through a magazine I saw reports they were recruiting
Vietnam veterans to go to Angola to fight as mercenaries and preferably Spanish
speaking. I cut out the article and sent for information. I told them who I was and all that
and they said, “We’d like to have you come over and talk to us.” Twenty thousand a
year, tax-free. Back then that was a lot of money. At that point in life I really thought
that’s what I wanted to do instead of going to medical school. I had already got admitted
to medical school. So to think it over I was very disgusted. I just left the country. I sold
my motorcycle and went to Mexico for about a couple of months. Then I was invited to
stay with a family for the last two weeks in Mexico City and they were very strong
Christians. To make a long story short I came back and I really liked what they had. I
liked the lifestyle and everything. They had everything that I was looking for and I
accepted Christ and that was it. I had no more problems.

RV: Really?
RO: It changed my life totally to this day.
RV: Wow. And so no Angola as a mercenary?
RO: No Angola. I went to medical school instead.

RV: So the conversion was—came at a time when you were really at a crossroads
of your life. And really at a crossroads of life it sounds like physically. Going to Angola
to fight as a mercenary as well as your whole career as a medical doctor. What about the
Vietnam experience? How does that play into this? How did you reconcile it or deal
with it differently after your conversion?
RO: Well, that’s a very, very interesting question because that is exactly what Christianity is all about. Religions of the world require that you are a certain way, that you be a certain way, that you attain retribution, and that you obtain favor by works. Christianity is just the opposite. In fact, Christianity is not even a religion; it’s a way of life. Christianity says you are a sinner. You have no capability of achieving enough righteousness to obtain favor in God’s eyes. And the only way that you can is if you pay for your sin one-hundred percent and that’s eternal death. That’s hell. And so we’ve all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So God knew that and in order for God to be a perfect person and to be a perfect just person, he’d have to have justice for all wrong-doing and wrong-doing can not go unpunished. So he sent his only begotten son, the Lord Jesus Christ to take our place and suffer our death for us. And in that he is our propitiation, our retribution and he is our intercessor. And you accept that and claim him as your Lord and his death on the cross, was your death on the cross, is my death on the cross and in that you have complete forgiveness. God has forgiven us unconditionally based on the perfect death of the only perfect individual that has ever lived. It’s the only sinless individual that has ever lived and that’s his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, God and man. And once you accept that you accept it and that’s through all scripture. The Bible itself was written over fifteen hundred years by sixty-six books by forty-five different authors. There is not one contradiction. People will try to find contradictions, but they’re not really contradictions when you really study it. I’ve been studying the Bible for thirty years on a daily basis. I read it and I just can’t get enough of it. It is the most perfect book that there is out. The salvation that an individual has through Jesus Christ is a perfect salvation and it’s an eternal salvation. Once I accepted that all the burden of that guilt that I had totally lifted.

RV: When was this?

RO: This was in 1975.

RV: Okay.

RO: I went to Mexico in ’73 and it took two years before I really, really claimed it. So it was in 1975.

RV: So you were in med school before ’75?

RO: I was in med school in ’73.
RV: Okay. Tell me about your attitude toward the government and how the
government has treated Vietnam veterans in this country and if you have any personal
eamples that would be good. This is this hugely controversial topic—the Veterans
Administration, PTSD, what happens post-conflict and how has our government helped
or hurt?

RO: Well, that’s a loaded question.

RV: (Laughs) It’s not meant to be.

RO: Our country is not a perfect country. But our country, I really feel, is the best
country around. We don’t have a perfect system. It’s run by imperfect people but yet it
is the best that I know of. It has tried. But yet when you have people who are
inexperienced trying to help people who have been in certain experiences they are treated
the same way. At the beginning I was very much opposed to do anything with the
country because I just saw a corruption. I saw how they managed us out over there and it
really, really destroys us. It’s just a very sour experience. I felt that I should get to be
reexamined because my medical records were lost when I got wounded and I probably
could get some disability. So I had an appointment scheduled with the VA to be
reassessed. On the way over I stopped the car and said, “What am I doing? I’m just
going to become a nut and be a dependent of the state.” So I refused to do that and I
turned away and never went back and I never collected anything from them because I
never was reexamined. Never even got a Purple Heart because my records were lost. I
knew that if I had gone there they’d ask me questions and if they said, “In what way were
you affected?” I probably would have made up things because I saw that with a lot of
other people. I just refused to do that. Sure, I’ve had some problems but very, very
minor. My goodness, you can trip over your doorstep and hit your head and have
problems the rest of your life and they’re very minor. But somebody shouldn’t have to
pay for that. So I thought to myself, “You know, I’m just going to deal with it and I’m
not going to be dependent upon anybody.” I’ve been very independent since. Because
my dad had some war wounds, he had a lot of service-connected things, and he would
spend a lot of time at the VA hospital. And they would keep him there forever and I just
didn’t want to do that. I protested. I protested and so I just distanced myself away from
the government. I thank the government for guarding our country but I said, “You know,
I’m just going to become so apolitical.” For the rest of my life I just lost faith. I mean I’m not going to put all of my eggs in one basket against the country. It’s just a government and imperfect people, lots of corruption. But so is every other government. So in other words, my honesty or my worship of the American government was lost and I said, “You know, they’re just regular people and full of holes. But that’s no reason for me to scorn it. I’m never going to leave it. I have too much invested in here and this is my home. In fact, my family dates back four-hundred years in New Mexico so this is it.”

RV: Okay. What about PTSD? Did you really—was your conversion the factor that kind of took care of that?

RO: Yeah, pretty much so.

RV: Because based on what you saw and what you experienced and the bitterness you came home with, you would have been ripe for that.

RO: Not really. I have a little advantage over you on that in that I do research. In fact, I even lecture on PTSD. I have a full—I’ve done a lot of research for one of the pharmaceutical companies and I have a lecture that I give for PTSD in which you learn a lot of facts.

RV: Can you tell me about it or share it with us?

RO: Sure. Only about twenty-five percent of people who are in extreme trauma ever experience PTSD. Women experience PTSD twice as often as a male. People who are candidates for PTSD usually come from a family that has had some psychological problems, that have been dysfunctional. Or that individual himself has had psychological problems or depression before, psychotic behavior, a little bipolar or something going on that will lead him to have PTSD. The vast majority of the people who undergo severe trauma never experience PTSD. Now, there’s post-traumatic stress disorder and then there’s post-traumatic stress syndrome. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is very short-lived and it lasts no longer than six months. That’s what everybody goes through after they’ve received trauma. A sixteen-year-old girl crashing her car for the first time and, “I don’t want to get in a car. I don’t want to get in a car ever, ever again.” Several months later there she is driving and she just had the syndrome, not the PTSD. Somebody from 9/11 who experienced all of that and today they won’t go into a building or are having these bad dreams, that’s PTSD. So our understanding of PTSD way back then was
nonexistent and it was through Vietnam that we became aware and then they said that all
trauma leads to that initially. That DMS (Editor’s note: DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical
Manual of Mental Disorders)) code had to actually be changed and that diagnosis had to
be redefined after they really discovered and in doing a lot of research that it was not
everybody. In fact, it was just a small minority of people that actually develop PTSD.
Now, most of your down-and-outers who claim PTSD are people who are addressed in
the B.G. Burkett’s book Stolen Valor. Have you read that?

RV: Yes, I have.

RO: Okay. They’re wannabes and they’re not really PTSD. They’re just
wannabes and they’re people with a little psychotic behavior anyway. Just a little
“touched in the head,” so to speak. But the vast majority of Vietnam veterans who were
engaged in combat, who actually fought are actually very functional. They’re very
functional and they do very well and have done very well. Just like he said, and I didn’t
realize this, but yet it’s true among all the veterans that I know. The average combat
veteran has a higher educational level than his noncombatant veteran colleague and his
marital retention is actually higher than that of the noncombatant. In other words, they
say, “Well, the divorce rate is very high among Vietnam veterans.” Well, maybe among
people who were in the rear but not people out in the bush. I’ve been married once.

RV: How do you account for that?

RO: Patience. Longevity. You’re in it and you stick it out in Vietnam and you
come back home and you’re in the marriage and you commit yourself and you stick it
out. Most divorces are when people become cowardly and they don’t want to take it
anymore, they can’t take anymore, no patience, no endurance, because all marriages are
hard. There’s not a single marriage that’s not hard and you don’t really know the
individual that you marry until after you marry them. Then you’re with that person and
you grow together in life and if you just—just like my nephew said this weekend, the
poor kid’s divorced. He said, “You know, the problem with divorce is that people just
quit and I really regret quitting. I wish I could be with you, Uncle. I’m sure you guys
have not had a rosy marriage your whole life but you never quit.”

RV: And so for veterans coming out of a conflict—

RO: They don’t quit.
RV: They’ve chosen to go forward and not quit. Okay, so you’re saying approximately twenty-five percent of those who experience combat or who served in a theater of war?

RO: No, the ones who have experience trauma. Because people who actually go to Vietnam, what percentage are actually in combat? About ten. Ten percent. Out of that ten percent, how many were involved in a very aggressive combat? Four percent. In other words, the people who were actually in a traumatic war situation in any theater, it’s much less than that of the support. The support is the majority, always.

RV: There’s been some research that’s recently come out on that, about redefining PTSD and the statistics and the percentages. The original percentage was 30.9 percent. Now it’s been revised down to 18.7. You’re saying it’s probably much lower than that or it’s lower than that.

RO: PTSD—well, the figures I have are already about ten years old. At that time they were saying about twenty-five percent so eighteen percent sounds right, too.

RV: So it’s on a down curve basically.

RO: Um-hm. Yes.

RV: So you’re asked to speak with groups about PTSD as a physician and a veteran. Or is it more just because you’re a physician?

RO: As a physician. I speak to mainly physicians. But my talk is geared towards physicians because it’s on diagnosis and treatment. But I start out with slides from Vietnam.

RV: Do you really?

RO: Yeah, and it’s like a shock and people get jolted into the talk and afterwards they’re all wide-eyed and then I talk about it.

RV: Tell me what you think the most significant thing you learned about yourself during your tour in Vietnam. What was that? If you can pin it down.

RO: The biggest thing, the one thing I learned, first of all growing up in a very stable home environment you’re brought up with two parents, they discipline you, teach you the value of everything. You have an excellent work ethic. Your parents expect you to do well in school. You get disciplined if you do poorly because they know your potential. There’s no excuse. Your failings are your fault. They’re not somebody else’s
fault. You take accountability working, respect, and you think of yourself as a pretty
good guy. “I’m not like the down-and-outers. I’m not like the skid-row bums. I’m not
like those thugs over there. I’m not like these juvenile delinquents. I’m pretty good.”
You do well in high school, you get—you’re a class officer, your letterman in athletics
and you’re most popular in this and you’ve got friends galore and you have a lot of fun
and you think that you’re pretty good. You think of yourself as a pretty good guy. Then
you go to Vietnam and you discover really who you are. You have never hated in your
life. All of the sudden you enjoy hating. You had never had so much fear and yet you’re
scared to death. You have never enjoyed wrong, yet you’re enjoying wrong. You see the
dark side of yourself. You see yourself for who you really, really are. It is the most
humbling experience. You come back—I came back very humbled and that’s why when
Christianity was presented to me it made sense. Before that I could care less about that
type of Christianity. I liked my little religion where I was a goody-two-shoes and
everybody was just fine and I’d do good, and that’s the way I’m going to work myself to
heaven because I’m good. But then I actually saw who I really was, given that
environment and it didn’t change me. It just revealed who I was.

RV: The same question about the United States. What do you think the United
States learned about itself in Vietnam?

RO: It learned that it’s not the big power it is. That it’s made up of people the
same size as other people. That our blood is just as red as theirs, that we cannot push
people around just because we’re the richest country in the world. We don’t have a cap
on anything. We don’t have the most population. We don’t have the most power and
other people with far less who have a will stronger than ours can beat us. That’s made us
less—I hope that made us less of a bully, but I don’t know. I mean, us being in Iraq right
now—I would never want to be president of the United States and I like President Bush a
lot but I think it’s a mistake for us being there. Because I think we’re making the same
mistake we made in Vietnam. “We’re going to show these people how to do it right.”
And that’s just not right. I mean that’s just not the way it is in other countries.

RV: Do you think that the United States took any good out of the Vietnam
conflict into the twenty-first century?
RO: Yeah, in humbling us it allowed us to learn how to build up a defense system that respected an opponent’s way of fighting and way of military achievement to the point where if you know your enemy you can at least defeat them. Whereas when the British came to the United States the Americans were employing the Indian methods, guerilla warfare. They didn’t know how to cope with it because everybody should fight on their terms like a big game. That’s one of the reasons why they were defeated. They were a whole lot more powerful than the colonies but yet they got defeated. It was almost unheard of even though it took eight years. I think we really learned, our military has learned, that we have to fight on other people’s terms and know how to do it and know how to change and know how to change our tactics and to do enough surveillance to become effective. I don’t know that we’ve learned it good enough. But I think it really helped us. No longer do we expect people to fight on our terms like the Britain did.

RV: Right. Is this sort of the thing that you would tell, say, the younger generations today about the Vietnam War?

RO: That’s what I’d tell them. I’d tell them that war is horrible. It’s not anything honorable. It is the worst experience you could ever go through. I speak there at the International Cultural Center about twice a year to high school and junior high kids about the Vietnam War. What I tell them is that war brings out the worst and the best in a person and the lessons that we learned from being over there is that here was a culture that was supposedly inferior to ours yet they were still human beings and we couldn’t defeat them. It’s because our view of superiority is not a real view of superiority. Just because you have Gameboys and digital players doesn’t mean that you’re more intelligent.

RV: One way that a lot of people today learn about their history, our history, the world’s history, is through movies and some read books. But what about learning about Vietnam through the movies? (Laughs) That’s a loaded question.

RO: (Laughs) Well, not really because there are so few movies that are good. *Full Metal Jacket* was totally anti-war and it was kind of a sick movie. *Platoon*, Oliver Stone is crazy. But yet *Platoon*—when I first watched *Platoon* my wife made me go—I could not remember what the movie was about because I had never had a flashback and
that was the closest thing to a flashback I had ever had. The whole time I was in the
movie my mind was just on Vietnam and the way it was. It was too real. It was too, too
real.

RV: The movie was?
RO: The movie was. I felt like I was there. Except that we didn’t have internal
fighting like they did. We had much more camaraderie. But it was just too real with
firefights, walking into the ambush and everything. Then there was *Hamburger Hill*.

*Hamburger Hill* was probably the best movie that depicted how it was. It showed the
camaraderie, it showed the fear, it showed the disaster, the losing, and more of the
emotion than *Platoon* did. Because *Hamburger Hill* was a true story. Out of all the
movies that I’ve ever seen about Vietnam, *Hamburger Hill* came the closest to it. There
was *The Boys in Company C*. that was kind of the first attempt at a movie. *Apocalypse
Now* was just garbage. It was just pure garbage.

RV: Why?
RO: I saw *Apocalypse Now* and I said after that, “It is so far removed from true
Vietnam it’s not even funny.”

RV: Why do you think that or why did you think that?
RO: You’ve seen *Apocalypse Now*?
RV: Oh, yes. Many times.
RO: Well, I’ve seen it once and that’s all I could take. (Laughs) Surfing while
being mortared, the loud music of the helicopters, blasting the whole village away. We
didn’t do that. We were humane. We did not kill innocents like that. We did not go in
there and kill people like that. Marlon Brando hiding out with them, with the
Montagnards, no, no. (Laughs) Just no. That was junk. Yeah there was tigers. I got
confronted with a tiger. That was filmed in the Philippines, which was the same
environment so he was sweating. There was a lot of things in there that were okay but not
really. Not really. I mean that was Frank Coppola’s view of what Vietnam was and it
really wasn’t. But *Hamburger Hill* was.

RV: What about books?
RO: Books, I’ve read a few books. I quit reading them because war novels are
very hard to read. Just the profanity, the blood, the gore in them, to me it’s too real and
to other people it’s more than what they can take. When I wrote my book I omitted all the blood and the gore. There’s a lot of blood and gore that I didn’t put down in there. And the profanity, I didn’t put any profanity in there.

RV: What made you want to write your book?

RO: For my family. It was like a legacy for my family. That was it.

RV: What was that experience like, actually writing a book about that time in your life?

RO: It was good. I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was fun. I really enjoyed it.

RV: Why was it fun?

RO: Number one is doing something I had never done before and then realizing that I could do it and just the challenge. Bringing back Vietnam was not a problem for me because I don’t mind recollecting. It’s just like I’m talking to you. There are some parts in there that I did mind so I didn’t write them in. There was one part that I had to totally omit that I gave a rough draft to this fellow who is actually a hospital administrator. He’s the CO of a hospital. He spent two tours, Silver Star, he was an officer in the Special Forces and he actually has a head wound. I let him read it and he said, “It’s good but take this part out and take that part out.” I said, “Why is that?” He said, “The statute of limitations on this stuff, it’s lifetime. All it would take was some,” he used some choice words; “Some peace-loving person that opposes the war to bring it up and there would be federal charges against you.” I said, “How can that be?” He said, “We all were in that situation. You need to take those out of there.” So I did. I took them out.

RV: And what happened with the aftereffects of the book, your reception within your family as well as the public, your colleagues, your friends?

RO: Oh, very, very good. It’s still going. The book was published in 1997. It’s been nine years and it’s still being sold. It’s used in schools and there’s one high school in North Carolina that their students use it as part of their text. It’s called Lessons of Vietnam. You know that. We talked about—what it is?

RV: Lindy Poling?

RO: Lindy Poling, yeah. I was going to say Poly Linding. (Laughs)

RV: That’s close.
RO: Lindy Poling. She communicates with me and that’s been very good. I did a lot of book signings all over and in a lot of places. Some community colleges use the book. They would ask me for large volumes and they would teach it and use it in their Vietnam classes. It’s resulted in some people coming all the way from—this one man drove all the way from Oregon to come and meet me because of the book and to thank me for it.

RV: Did you know he was coming?
RO: No. Well, he sent a letter and then I made arrangements to meet him that day and he did. He came in and he brought his wife and he said he just wanted to talk to me.

RV: What was that like?
RO: It was a little awkward. I didn’t know him; he didn’t know me. Our experiences were—he was in the Marines and I was in the Marines. But we talked about his family. I’m in the public and I know how to talk to strangers. So I just kind of developed this conversation and got a lot of his life and then I thanked him for the honor, and he thanked me. And he cried and I didn’t. (Laughs)

RV: You did not?
RO: Pardon me?
RV: You said you didn’t?
RO: No, I can’t cry because the thing is that experience is over. I’ve cried once. That was at the Vietnam Wall at Washington, DC.

RV: I was actually going to ask you about that. Can you tell me about your experience with that memorial?
RO: Oh, it was like a funeral, a funeral I had never gone to. It was like a belated funeral. I can’t even hardly think about it without bringing tears. I had never seen the names etched in stone. As I was reading the names it was like going back to that time and watching them die, smelling the blood, smelling the powder, the gunpowder, the sulfur, the burning flesh, the agony, the groaning. It just brought everything back and as I saw each name I could see each time because I was there. It was horrible. It was really horrible and this is that time a helicopter passed over and it just made it worse. The sound of a helicopter—I’m used to it now because they’re all over the place. But at that time and that moment, the fellow who was there who lived in Washington, another
corpsman veteran who was in the Marine Corps during the Tet offensive, he invited us over. The poor guy looked at us and I couldn’t hardly see. I cleaned my eyes and my wife gave me a hanky. She was crying. I looked up and he was crying. (Laughs) He was bawling and he said, “I don’t ever cry.” I was just on my knees and the memory of those poor young kids of nineteen and twenty and twenty-one. The oldest was twenty-one.

RV: And have you ever been back to it or have you seen one of the moving walls?
RO: No, just that one time. It was just a few years ago. It was about three years ago we went. It had been a long time. I had never wanted to go see it.

RV: Why not?
RO: I knew (laughs) I would react that way. I feel that I have already dealt with it and I just don’t want to deal with it again. It’s like my dad dying. I don’t want to be reminded of it. I love my dad dearly. I respect him, I honor him. But I would not want to go through all of that again because I loved him too much. It’s just one of those things. You’re so young and having to grow up so fast and deal with it. And then you come back and people are laughing about it and calling you a baby killer, dope bag and having gone through that experience was just horrible.

RV: We should say on the record that your book is titled *When I Was A Boy: One Year in Vietnam*. Where can people get that book if they wanted to?
RO: Well, right now the distributor went bankrupt and the bookstores usually quit carrying a book after one year, but it was carried for over five years. But right now the only place is just through me and I still have a supply of them and it’s just through my office here in Lubbock.

RV: Well, Dr. Ordoñez, is there anything else that you’d like to touch on in this interview?
RO: No.

RV: What has it been like for you? You’ve talked about this already a bit. But doing this oral history interview, it’s different from writing a book; it’s different than talking about it with friends. What’s it been like to actually be interviewed about your experience?
RO: Well, you have control and I don’t. That’s been very unnerving. It does.

When a person talks about the war they always have to be in control to avoid those overly-sensitive issues that they don’t want to think about. My fear was that you would bring up an area that I didn’t want to talk about. And you have. (Laughs) I have a tear in my eye right now from thinking about The Wall. To me, I still don’t want to think about it. It was just too painful. You know, you’re born and raised with your brother, you play with him, fight with him, eat with him, you guys tell scary stories at night together and that’s the way it is with the people you live with in Vietnam. You eat with them. They’re sleeping right next to you; twenty-four hours a day together. You know their stories inside and out and in a split second you’re holding their body parts in your hand. Nobody should have to go through that. But when you go through it it’s surreal. You don’t know how to react and you know that you have to go on. You have to survive. So you put those feelings—you shelve them and you don’t realize they’ve been shelved. Then all of the sudden a simple name on an etched stone brings out the feelings that should have come out back then. A repressed grief and you weren’t afforded the privilege of crying back then. You couldn’t have that luxury of emotion. So you shelved it because you’ve got to go on. You’ve got to continue otherwise you’re going to get shot the next moment. Bullets are flying by and everything and you just have to not think about it and there’s just a body at the time. You put them in the helicopter in a poncho. You don’t even have body bags and you can’t think about it. You don’t think about it. You just go on and then all of a sudden the chickens come home to roost and here it is thirty-some years later and there it is right in front of you. And you’re having to deal with it and you haven’t had to deal with it in this whole thirty-five years or thirty-some years. Then you find yourself just totally emotional and you’ve never been emotional. I think The Wall was probably the hardest thing I’ve ever gone through.

RV: It sounds like it was.

RO: Yeah, because you’re repressing and you live your life and you go on and all of a sudden you’re taken back to that time. You really don’t want to be taken back. That’s part of your life but it’s not your life. Your life is who you are right now. Whatever profession or whatever vocation you have, that’s who you are. Your family situation, what you are in the community, and that’s who you are. If you live as though
your life is still back there you have a mental problem. So you just don’t want to bring up
those things and then all of the sudden here you are. They’re right in your face and it
was, I guess, good and bad both. Good that I dealt with it and bad that I had to deal with
it.
RV: Yeah. Well, is there anything else you would like to talk about?
RO: That’s it. No, that’s it.
RV: Okay. Well, we’ll end the interview now with Dr. Robert L. Ordoñez.
Thank you very much for your time.
RO: Thank you very much. I hope this is helpful.